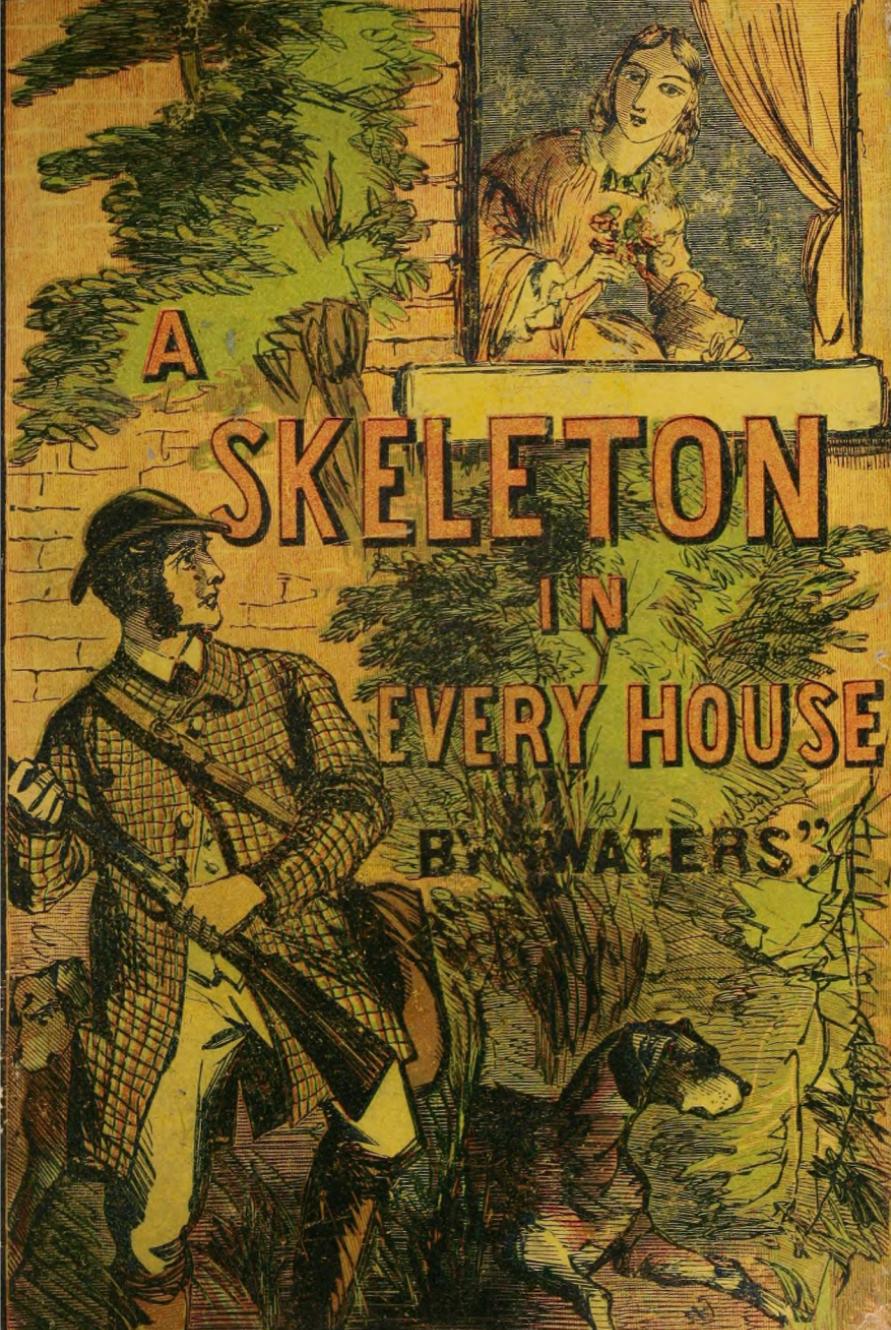


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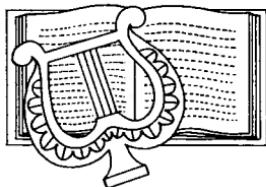
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VOL. CCXXII.

A SKELETON IN EVERY HOUSE

A

SKELETON IN EVERY HOUSE.

BY

W A T E R S ,

AUTHOR OF

“ RECOLLECTIONS OF A DETECTIVE POLICE
OFFICER,” &c., &c.

— — —

LONDON:

CHARLES H. CLARKE, 13, PATERNOSTER-ROW

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
No. 1.—THE SURGEON'S STORY	13
„ 2.—THE MYSTERIES OF THE BILL-BOOK .	39
„ 3.—THE THREE SISTERS	65
„ 4.—THE SECRET	139
„ 5.—THE LOVE-CHARM	163
„ 6.—THE WIFE'S SECRET	227
„ 7.—THE IDIOT'S EVIDENCE	245
„ 8.—THE MERIVALE FAMILY	265
„ 9.—THE STOLEN BANK NOTES	285
„ 10.—THE MERCHANT OF ST. MALO	316

PREFACE.

That there is “a Skeleton in every House” is a widely-accepted truth, the solemn significance of which it has been my aim to illustrate in the Tales which make up this volume, and, whilst pointing to the sin-spectres which, in of course varying numbers and different degrees of ghastliness, haunt the memories of all men, to incidentally teach that they may be effectually exorcised by a true contrition.

C. W

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 1.—THE SURGEON'S STORY.

“ASMODEUS,” said I, “was but a dull knave after all, to have been able to suggest no craftier mode of spying out the inner life of families than unroofing their houses, and so to mark their sayings and doings when society is shut out from observing them. A poor device that, Mr. Rochford!”

Mr. Rochford was a surgeon in good practice, with whom I sometimes indulged in a long gossip when neither of us had anything better to do. Upon this occasion we had been talking over the *Salleir* tragedy, with the details of which the papers were just then full.

“A halting, stunted one, like its author,” said Rochford. “The real demeanour of the inmates towards each other would be revealed to the spies on the

housetop, but the phantoms which, in so many instances, as *we* know, haunt the churchyard of Memory, and with sudden, sightless apparition, often evoked by the merest trifle—a chance allusion—the tolling of a bell—the laughter of a child—blanch men's cheeks, and check their mirth at its loudest, would be invisible to the prying demon. Take a case, within my own knowledge, as one instance. I was, as you know, well acquainted with Fauntleroy, the banker, and *was* in the habit of dining with him twice or thrice in the year at his charming place, near Enfield. Now, a most amiable man was Fauntleroy, and of as varied conversational powers as any man I have ever known. A pattern family man, to outward appearance, in short. Nevertheless he became, during the last two years of his life a most interesting psychological study to me. The frequent flaws and starts of strange temper which for no assignable cause marred his mirth in gayest moments,—the sunshine of hilarity becoming suddenly eclipsed as it were by the dark shadow of a giant grief or fear,—astonished and perplexed me. I especially remember one incident, upon which the subsequent discovery threw a lurid light, showing by how ghastly a skeleton that splendid home must have been for long years haunted.

“I had dined with him, for the last time, as it fell out, and with the dessert came in a charming little girl, who might be about nine years of age, and, if I remember aright, was his niece. The bright-eyed,

golden-haired child was taken upon his knee, and her pretty prattle hearkened and replied to with smiling interest till she happened to say—*à propos* of what I forget,—‘Ah, your hair will be grey by the time I am old enough to be married.’ As the words left her lips, Fauntleroy started from his chair as if struck with a dagger, burst into a passion of tears, and, with clenched hands wildly beating the air, staggered out of the room, to the blank astonishment and dismay of every one present. The girl’s chance allusion,” added Rochford, “to the time when his hair would be grey—a time which his foreboding consciousness whispered would never come for him, must, one can now understand, have elicited that manifestation of remorseful despair, though when witnessed it was unintelligible.”

“There are thousands of similar instances,” I remarked. “How grim a skeleton, for example, must have haunted princely Claremont, and have looked down from ‘neath the uplifted roof, at the very moment an inexorable and long dreaded Fate crossed the threshold. He must have seen the great Lord Clive, builder and owner of the splendid pile, with the flush of recent victory over his parliamentary foes upon his brow, acceding with graceful gallantry to a lady-visitor’s request, that he would mend her a pen. The door closes, and the next moment the tiny pen-knife has severed the thread of a mighty life, upon which had hung the destinies of millions of men.”

“ Which instances or examples,” said Rochford, “ only confirm an opinion I have long held, that lawyers and doctors are about the only people favoured with—scared, I should say, by glimpses from time to time of the ghosts which haunt the secret conscience-crypts of the world.”

“ Divinity—especially Roman Catholic Divinity—if it might but open its reverend lips, would, I expect, have stranger tales to tell than either Law or Physic. Your friend D——, to wit, whom the autocratic Cardinal silenced a few weeks ago.”

“ I dare say. By the bye, the mention of D——’s name recalls to mind a startling chapter in the domestic history of a family which dates from the Conquest; and which it was my lot to read line by line, word by word. You knew Major —— by reputation?”

“ Certainly: he was mentioned with commendation in one or more of Combermere’s Indian despatches. I have too a hazy recollection, founded I suppose upon newspaper report, that a strange catastrophe overtook him, or some portion of his family.”

“ Founded upon deceptive echoes rather, of the whispered gossip which circulated at the time amongst the upper Ten Thousand. The newspapers were kept skilfully at fault on the matter. The catastrophe moreover, was common-place enough; though the causes and complications which led to it were in very truth strange—and lamentable as strange.”

"Why did the mention of D——, the heterodox priest, remind you of Major —? Surely the gallant officer was a sound Protestant."

"No doubt of it, sound as Spooner, which is saying much. I will not only tell you why," added Rochford, settling himself, *en permanence*, in an arm-chair,— "I will not only tell you why the mention of D——'s name reminded me of Major —, but give you the chapter of his personal history which I spoke of. If you should ever print the same, be pleased to call him Major Wilmot."

"Be it so; and now for the story."

"D—— and I," proceeded Rochford, "are, you must know, Lancashire men, and were somewhat intimately acquainted with each other in Liverpool, where he at that time officiated as priest. I removed to London, and was fortunate enough to obtain, after no very long or severe probation, a lucrative practice at the West End. The knowledge of this induced D—— to give a Mr. Forster,—Valentine Forster,—a letter of introduction to me, which briefly stated that the bearer was a gentleman who had been a fellow-student of D——'s at Stonyhurst, had since studied medicine in Paris, and was desirous of obtaining an engagement as assistant-surgeon in London. Valentine Forster was a sternly handsome man of about thirty, and of reserved but courteous manners. Happening to be in want of an assistant, and his testimonials being satisfactory, I engaged him at once.

"He did not suit me over well; not from lack of ability, but that, as I was not long in discovering, his heart was not in his business. He was constantly, when he thought himself unobserved, and there was no very pressing duty to be performed, falling into a gloomy reverie, during which I have seen, by the flaming, fitful, darkling light of his fiercely expressive eyes, that his thoughts were far away, and engrossed by memories, passions, regrets, which touched him nearly. I soon, however, grew to like Valentine Forster so much, that I should have been unwilling to exchange him for an assistant of greatly superior business habits."

"This is rather a common-place prologue to a startling story!"

"I shall wake you up by-and-by, never fear. Well, not long after Forster's engagement with me, I paid my first professional visit to Major Wilmot, as we have settled to re-name him, and was lucky enough to treat him with signal success for an old wound that had freshly broken out. He lived, as you know, in splendid style in Berkeley-square; his fortune was an ample one; he moved in distinguished society; his wife, a singularly amiable woman, was also endowed with rarest beauty, grace, and sweetness; he had one child, a boy, and was likely to be soon again a father. The Major himself, a fine soldierly man of fascinating manners and spotless reputation, was also an attached husband and doting father.

"Well, thought I, when I first made the acquaint-

ance—professional acquaintance of course—of the Wilmots, here unquestionably are all the elements that make up a blissful, brilliant life: this surely must be the abode of cloudless felicity. I was never more wretchedly mistaken, and had not attended the family a month before I was perfectly convinced that affrighting spectral shadows—whether projected from the past or the future—chilled and darkened that splendid home. My imagination, though far from being an unusually vivid or creative one, is always more excited by dark, obscure hintings, than by storied circumstance, and hence it must have been that trifles, to which others might have attached but slight significance, created a belief in my mind, which subsequent events confirmed, that there was always, to the mind's eye of Major Wilmot, an avenging Nemesis close at hand, prepared to strike whenever the hand of Time should mark the appointed hour upon the dial of Destiny.

“Major Wilmot, I must explain, was married in India. His wife was the daughter of Jabez Penford, who amassed a splendid fortune by speculating, in concert or rivalry with the late Mr. Joseph Hume, M.P., in commissariat supplies for the Anglo-Indian armies. Mrs. Wilmot was Penford's only surviving child by his first marriage, and was three years old when her mother died. A year only had elapsed when Penford married again. The maiden name of the second wife was Copley, and she was some quarter of a century younger than her wealthy husband. The sole issue of

this union was another daughter, who was baptized Adeline, after her mother. The second Mrs. Penford would seem to have been a vain, capricious woman, but, till Adeline had reached her sixteenth year, no breach of the seventh commandment was imputable to her, nor proveably perhaps then ; although some indiscretions, flirtations born of idleness and vanity, possessed her husband's mind with a well-nigh frenzied jealousy. A compromise ultimately took place ; and the formal deed of separation finally subscribed, stipulated that Mrs. Penford should depart forthwith for Europe accompanied by her daughter, for whom the father had never manifested any great affection. She, Mrs. Penford, was on no account to intrude herself upon her husband's relatives in England, and to assume there any name but his : these conditions, rigorously fulfilled, would entitle her to an income during life of six hundred pounds per annum. In the event of her death, Adeline would receive the same annuity, and be definitively provided for by her father's will."

"Rather a hard bargain for the lady, the husband being so wealthy, the personality, chiefly in British Consols, amounting, as I happen to know, to over four hundred thousand pounds. Especially so, if, as you intimate, the wife's frailty was not proveable."

"Well, yes. But Mrs. Penford was as anxious to be quit of her aged, querulous husband, as he of his gay, volatile wife. The parting of the sisters was a painful one, Emily, afterwards Mrs. Wilmot, having

always been ardently attached to Adeline; an attachment deepened in its tender solicitude by anxiety for the future—so weakly bucklered!—of one who seems to have been as simple-minded and credulous as she was true, and beautiful, and good.

“The anxious foreboding of the elder sister was prophetic. In less than two years after the departure of Adeline and her mother from India, Mr. Penford in a few curt sentences informed Emily that Mrs. Penford was dead, and that Adeline, following the mother's example, had turned to folly. He added a stern injunction to his horror-stricken daughter never, under pain of his severest displeasure, to mention the outcasts' names, or in the slightest manner allude to the hateful memories associated with them. About two months afterwards Mr. Penford again stood before his daughter with an open letter in his shaking hand. His face was white and rigid, and, spite of his iron will, the quivering lips could with difficulty articulate the sad tidings which he came to announce: ‘Adeline,’ said he, ‘has followed her mother: she is dead.’

“In the ensuing hot season Mr. Penford and his daughter left Calcutta for the hill-country, where they made the acquaintance of Major Wilmot, to whom, after a brief wooing, Emily Penford was wedded. This event quickened Mr. Penford's desire to return to his native country, and as his fortunate marriage rendered Major Wilmot independent of his profession he embarked with his wife and father-in-law for England.

Jabez Penford's health was, however, so completely broken down by the climate of India that he died during the voyage. The tenacity of purpose for which he had been remarked during life was as strongly displayed at the closing scene; almost the last words which trembled from his lips being a whispered injunction to his daughter never to reveal her lost sister's shame to Wilmot, never even to speak of her or her mother. Mrs. Wilmot gave the required promise, and kept it!

"I have no doubt that an amiable woman such as Mrs. Wilmot must have shed some natural tears for her father's death, and no doubt, either, that she wiped them soon, or at all events that they soon dried in the brilliant atmosphere of wealth and fashion in which she for the first time drew intoxicating breath. Be that, however, as it may, a mansion in Berkeley-square was bought, splendidly furnished; Major Wilmot was returned to Parliament for a Northern borough, through the influence of the noble family with which he was connected; and his wife safely delivered of a son; all within six months of Penford's decease.

"An incident which occurred about a month only previous to the commencement of my attendance in Berkeley-square, first checked and saddened that triumphant march of life. Mrs. Wilmot, upon returning from the Opera, was surprised and alarmed to hear that the Major had been seized with a cataleptic fit, whilst busily engaged in the library, reading and sort-

ing letters and papers. Medical aid had, however, been promptly obtained, and when Mrs. Wilmot reached Berkeley-square, her husband, though still nervous and shaken, had recovered the free use of his faculties, and spoke of the attack for which he could not, or would not, assign any cause, with calmness and equanimity. It was from that time that symptoms of extreme nervous irritability began to manifest themselves. The regimen and general treatment necessitated by the state of the wound, which as I have mentioned had broken out afresh, mitigated those symptoms, and I almost began to hope that my opinion that the Major's malady was moral rather than physical, might prove to be unfounded, when other incidents, following close upon each other, confirmed and deepened my first impression.

" Summoned in hot haste one afternoon to Berkeley-square, I was informed by Mrs. Wilmot, that the Major, who had been taking horse-exercise in Hyde-park, had galloped back as if pursued by the Furies, hurried to his chamber, and having locked himself in, refused to admit even his wife. After a long parley I prevailed upon him to admit *me*, when I found him in a state of tremendous agitation and excitement. His teeth were clenched, and a cold sweat bedewed his ghastly white face. I administered a powerful sedative, and the next morning found him much calmer. The improvement continued, not, however, without sudden relapses, which, as I have already said, could

only be accounted for by the hypothesis of a secret dread, an overpowering fear, that some terrible calamity would sooner or later overtake him. I have seen him kiss his child with passionate eagerness, sobbing as he did so; the same with his wife; whilst a sudden and louder than usual knocking or ringing at the hall door would cause him to spring from his chair, and hearken with suspended breath and starting eyes!

"I could discern no sign of positive cerebral disease; and one morning, when he was calmer than usual, I took the liberty of observing, that it was marvellous that one so fortunately placed, and having so brilliant a future before him, should give way to such puerile fears or fancies.

"'Ah, my dear sir,' said he. 'You are still far wide. With Hamlet, I can say, that I could be bounded by a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.'

"'Bad dreams! Nonsense! Excuse me, Major Wilmot.'

"'You do not believe in omens, in the shadows of coming events cast before, which the poet speaks of?'

"'In a qualified sense, I do. If, for example, a man has forged and uttered a bill of exchange, which offence he fears will be brought home to him, the shadow cast before of the gibbet, formerly—and now-a-days of the model prison—would, I dare say, loom upon him in both his waking and dreaming hours.'

"Major Wilmot was silent for a few moments, and then said, in a quick, quivering voice, fixedly regarding me the while, 'Is it not an established fact in medical science, that in certain conditions of the brain we may firmly believe ourselves to see some object or person, when that object or person could not be possibly visible,—at all events, to mortal eyes?'

"It is so asserted by eminent authorities, and I can believe them, though such a case has never occurred in my own experience.'

"My answer seemed to please the Major, and he was about to add something more, when a servant came in with a sealed parcel in his hand.

"Ah,' said Major Wilmot, as he glanced at the address and post-mark, 'from our Calcutta agents. Excuse me, Mr. Rochford.' He then hastily broke the seal, and I in rising to withdraw could not avoid seeing that the parcel contained several letters.

"I had not been home more than an hour when Hopkins, Major Wilmot's valet, brought a verbal message from his master. The Major wished to see me at my earliest convenience. Hopkins added that his master had had another fit, and would have downright fainted but for a huge draught of brandy which he had just strength enough to ring for and swallow. He was then got to bed, and was already much better. The servants, Hopkins said, had been cautioned not to mention the circumstance in the hearing of Mrs. Wilmot, who was gone out at the time for a carriage.

airing ; and I was requested to be equally silent on the subject.

“ ‘Can it be,’ mused I, after dismissing the valet with a promise to see his master as quickly as might be,—‘can it be that those letters from India, from his Calcutta agents, which he was about to read when I left, contained disastrous news ? Are the Major’s terrors caused by losses, ruinous money-losses in India ? Has he perchance madly invested the immense fortune said to have been left to him by his wife’s father, in some bubble-scheme out there ?’

“ He was reading letters,—thus ran the current of my thoughts. He was reading letters when he had the cataleptic fit; letters it may be from India; the first intimation, perhaps, of the tempest of ruin which has now wrecked his fortunes. And when he rode madly home from the Park might he not have met and spoken there with some one who had earlier news than he of what had occurred ? Well, yes ; but why in that case did he ask me if it did not sometimes occur that people, in certain conditions of the brain, fancy they see things or persons impossible to be seen by mortal eyes ?

“ I could make nothing of it—gave up the attempt, and hastened to Berkeley-square.

“ I found Major Wilmot in the library. He was very pale, but calm, unnaturally calm. The expression of his face was similar to that which I have many times seen in the faces of men who have long refused

to believe that it would be necessary to submit to a painful and dangerous surgical operation, but who, when at last convinced that there is hope or chance of life in the knife alone, nerve themselves to undergo it. He shook me by the hand with unusual warmth, and requested me to be seated. I noticed that he so placed his own chair partly within a window recess that the heavy cloth curtains shadowed his features.

“ ‘ You have published a work,’ said he, ‘ have you not, upon the phenomena of insanity, and its proper mode of treatment ? ’

“ ‘ I have, and sold, I think, a dozen copies. The M.D.’s were indignant at my presumption, and effectually buried my pamphlet ; it was little more.’

“ ‘ I have more confidence in you than in all the M.D.’s in London. Look you, Rochford,’ he went on with unusual precipitation to say—‘ look you, Rochford, I have pressing need of your services as a friend, as much or more than as a medical adviser. The case is this : I received this morning a number of letters from India, one of which had been addressed to Mrs. Wilmot’s father, and which, he having left India, and indeed the world, was forwarded to me. It relates to a tragic story,’ continued the Major, with emotion, ‘ of which it is essential that I should give you a brief outline. Mrs. Wilmot’s father married a second time, an unfortunate fact, known to me only a short time since. The morally-divorced wife left India with her daughter now nearly four years ago, and ultimately settled at

Heavytree, near Liverpool. One of the conditions under which she was to receive a considerable annuity from her husband was, that she should not continue to bear his name: a strangely, one may say an eccentrically, vindictive man was Jabez Penford ?'

" 'Who, may I ask, was Jabez Penford ?'

" 'Mrs. Wilmot's father. That condition, I say, having been sternly insisted upon, and as the agent through whom the money was to be paid would, she thought, be sure to report any breach of the contract to his employer, Mrs. Penford and her daughter passed as Mrs. and Miss Copley.'

" 'Excuse my freedom, Major Wilmot, but pray do not take so much wine. You are, I can see, greatly excited already, in spite of your forced exterior calmness.'

" 'I must to-day, Rochford. My nerves have been rudely shaken. Not by what I am now speaking of,' he added, sharply.

" I bowed, and the Major, having gulped down another bumper, resumed.

" 'Miss Copley was—I have been told that she was—a very beautiful girl. There happened to be then residing at Everton, a suburb of Liverpool, one Captain Serle, home on sick leave from In—— from the Cape, I mean. An intimacy took place between him and the Copleys. The usual results followed, and, in short, Captain Serle ultimately abandoned Adeline. For a time only in intention—upon my soul, only for a

time in intention! He was offended with her. A rumour had reached his ear that Mrs. Copley had been a kept woman, or worse, and in an angry interview with his wife——'

"‘His wife!’

"‘Yes—perdition! Yes, his wife!’ shouted Major Wilmot, starting from his chair, and fiercely pacing to and fro. ‘I *am* a fool,’ he presently said, restraining himself, and sitting down—‘I *am* a fool to take so much wine. Let me see, I was saying that at that last interview Adeline seemed to admit by her tearful silence that the charge against her mother was true. One can see now, that Mrs. Copley, or Penford—d—n her!—excuse me, I am getting wild again, and no wonder, for Serle is a fast friend of mine, and he will be ruined body and soul by this accursed—I repeat that I can see now that Mrs. Copley had sternly impressed upon her daughter, who stood in great awe of her, never to divulge that she was a moral *divorcée*, so to speak. Captain Serle flung away in a furious passion, and sailed the very next day for, for Port Natal.’

"‘It is indeed a sad, but very common story,’ I remarked.

"‘Common story! Death and Furies, common!’ screamed Major Wilmot, again starting from his chair. ‘But I forget,’ he added, instantly mastering himself, ‘I forget, d—n the wine, that you do not yet know the infernal upshot. Serle, there can be no doubt,

fully intended to return some day to his wife, for whom, however, let the truth be told, he had ceased to feel any very ardent affection, inasmuch as he resented having been duped into marriage by a beautiful face. That now, if you will, is a common story.'

" ' Go on, sir.'

" ' Serle—I have told you how intimate our friendship is—Serle, I once more repeat, intended one day to return to his wife, and meanwhile write to, and make suitable provision for her. He was making arrangements with that view, when he received a letter from a fellow whom he knew by name, informing him—may the curse of God rest upon the villain's soul—informing him that Adeline Copley was dead! What motive could have prompted that lie, I cannot imagine.'

" ' Lie!'

" ' Yes, lie! a horrible devilish lie! Yes, and there were circumstances artfully set forth in the letter which left no doubt as to the alleged fact.'

" ' Left no doubt, perhaps you mean, in the mind of a man willing to believe the alleged fact!'

" ' What do *you* mean? Willing to believe! Well, well, perhaps it was so. Pardon my excitement. My excuse is that the unhappy Adeline is—O God—Mrs. Wilmot's sister! To-day,' presently continued Major Wilmot—' to-day, as I told you before, I received a letter addressed to Mr. Penford, Calcutta, by which it appears that her mother's death, and Serle's desertion,

drove poor Adeline mad, that she has been till within the last six months the inmate of a *Maison de Santé* near Paris, and is now living with a distant female relative at Brompton. The letter was written to claim the six hundred a year guaranteed by Mr. Penford to his youngest daughter by the deed of separation.'

" ' Is her mental health restored ? '

" ' No, but she is perfectly harmless. O Life ! O Time ! O World ! '

" ' What would you have me do in this most lamentable case ? '

" ' First hear it out : Serle has since married, has a family, and is himself dying. That is certain.'

" ' I should almost think that in his case 'twere happiness to die.'

" ' True, true ! To die is always a resource in the worst extremity. What, you ask, would I have you do ? Well, this : Mrs. Wilmot, you will agree, must never hear of this thrice-accursed business. She believes her sister to be dead. That precious belief must not for the world's wealth be disturbed. In her present state especially, a hint of the terrible truth would be fatal to her. Serle, as I said before, is dying, and, moreover, is quite incapable of supplying Adeline's needs. I will do so largely, without stint or measure, and you will confer upon me an obligation which I shall never be able to sufficiently repay, by seeing her, advising her relative and present guardian, a Mrs. Colson, as to the best mode of medical treatment in

her case, and announcing that her father has left her two,—yes, two thousand pounds a-year, subject to one peremptory condition namely—that she resides *out of* England. Such a stipulation will not appear to be a very extraordinary one to Mrs. Colson, who is no doubt aware that Penford would not suffer his wife to bear his name, or have intercourse with his relatives in England. I am, you know, Rochford,' added Major Wilmot, 'so nervously anxious that Mrs. Wilmot should not by any chance meet with her unhappy sister.'

"I said that in her present state—Mrs. Wilmot was within a week of her confinement—such a meeting might be highly injurious, but that at a future time she *ought* to be informed that her sister was still living.

"Major Wilmot said that was a matter for future discussion; meanwhile would I undertake the commission he had proposed to me? taking care of course that no hint escaped me as to Adeline's sister being in England and married to Major Wilmot. I agreed to do so, and, as soon as we had matured the details of the arrangement I was to propose, I took leave.

"Very odd it has many times appeared to me that I could have been so dull-witted as not even to suspect, at the time, that—but it's better not to run before one's story. I went to Brompton the next day, saw Mrs. Colson and the beautiful Adeline, and stated the proposal I was empowered to make. It was received with

exultant gratitude by Mrs. Colson, and by Adeline with a rapture infantine in its joyous exuberance, as soon as her shattered intellect could grasp it. ‘It was Charles’ (Serle’s baptismal name)—‘she knew it was Charles that had sent her all that money—I had taken a considerable sum with me—and who wanted her to leave England and go to him at the Cape of Good Hope—Cape of Blessed Hope!—oh, to be sure it was Charles—beloved Charles,’ and the unfortunate clapped her hands and danced about the room with childish glee. I could have wept for pity.

“ It was settled that Mrs. Colson and Adeline should leave England for Italy at the end of about six weeks,—there were reasons for the delay which I do not remember, and I returned to report progress in Berkeley-square.

“ Mrs. Wilmot was in due time confined with her second child, a girl, and the Major’s nervous tremors appeared to be gradually passing away. Adeline once away in Italy, he should, he said, be himself again.

“ Matters were in this state when, about a month after Mrs. Wilmot’s accouchement, I, feeling myself somewhat indisposed, requested Valentine Forster to see several patients whom he had not before attended, amongst them Mrs. Colson, who was suffering from a bilious attack.

“ Forster had been gone more than four hours, and I was wondering what could have detained him so long, when he entered the surgery in a state of flaming ex-

citement. I really thought he was drunk, and said so.

“ ‘True,’ he exclaimed, ‘drunk with rage ! I seek your counsel, sir,’ he continued, after helping himself to an effervesceing drink, ‘and shall be brief in stating why I have need of it. You are aware that about threec years ago I was assistant to Mr. Fowler of Liverpool. One of our clients was a lady residing at Heavytree, a Mrs. Copley.’

“ ‘Good God, are you mixed up in that terrible business ? ’

“ ‘I do not quite understand you, sir ; permit me if you please to go on. Mrs. Copley had a daughter, Adeline Copley, whom you have seen, and I need not therefore describe her. I madly loved her, with all my whole heart, soul, strength, and should, I firmly believe—and this is the quenchless hell of rage and hate which flames within and sometimes half maddens me—should, I firmly believe, have won her love, had not a Captain Serle,—not his real name, I suspect,—come between me and my hopes. There was not then any presumption on my part, in a worldly sense, in aspiring to the favour of Adeline Copley. An uncle of mine, since dead, had promised to make me his heir—would have done so, I doubt not, but the wild dissipation into which I plunged when I discovered that Adeline was lost to me, deprived me of his good opinion. Let me pass over the next four months. At the end of that time Captain Serle had tired of his beautiful toy, and

sailed for the Cape of Good Hope. The address he left was, Captain Serle, under cover to Messrs. Birley, Graham's Town. His departure revived my hopes, for I knew not then that he and Adeline had been privately married. I believed she had fallen, but, strangely as it may sound, I recked not of that. The consuming love I felt for her withered up all conventional, or, if you will, instinctive notions that would, in idea, have smirched her loveliness. I only feared that Serle would renew his correspondence with her, return to her, mayhap, and to prevent such fatal mischance I wrote him a letter, cunningly worded, announcing her death.'

" ' It was a shamefully wicked act, Mr. Forster.'

" ' May be so, but I care not for its shame and wickedness. I also, immediately after her mother's death, fearing that some relative might take her away, wrote to the London House through which Mrs Copley's annuity had been transmitted informing them that Adeline had died suddenly. No inquiry was made, that I heard of, as to the truth of the announcement in either case. I plotted in vain. Her husband's desertion had shaken Adeline's intellect. her mother's death consummated the mental ruin, and before she had been six weeks an orphan she was pronounced incurably mad! A relative who had married in France had her transferred to a *Maison de Sante* near Paris, and I believed her to be there still till this afternoon. She did not know me,' added Forster with bitter rage, ' spoke only of " Charles "—eternal'

curses cling to “Charles!” I could eat his heart in the market-place.’

“‘ This is most unbecoming language, Mr. Forster—’

“‘ It is—it is, Mr. Rochford, and I crave pardon for using it to you. My mind is tossed in a sea of doubt, bewilderment, and rage! Could you, sir,’ he added, suddenly—‘ could you put me in the way of unearthing Captain Serle?’

“‘ Not I: Major Wilmot might be able to do so—’ I stopped abruptly, feeling that I had committed an indiscretion. ‘ I don’t know, however, what right I have to say so,’ I added, awkwardly enough.

“‘ Major Wilmot might be able to do so,’ echoed Forster; ‘ and you, Mr. Rochford, know Adeline Copley, and are, Mrs. Colson says, her zealous friend! Odd!’

“‘ What is odd?’

“‘ That I have never chanced to see Major Wilmot: that’s all.’

“ A ring at the surgery bell put a stop to the conversation, which I was by no means sorry for, and I soon afterwards went out

“‘ Is the christening to take place to-morrow in Berkeley-square?’ asked Valentine Forster the next day.

“‘ Yes.’

“‘ A Royal Highness and a Right Reverend Bishop are to grace the ceremony, I have heard.

“‘ I have heard so, too.”

“ ‘ It will be a magnificent affair, no doubt. A most triumphant personage is Major Wilmot! Beauty, riches, glory!—what a monopoliser of the world’s richest gifts! Fortunate Major Wilmot! ’ added Forster, with a bitter sneer, as he left the surgery; ‘ though it is said you should never pronounce any man to have been fortunate till—he is dead ! ’

“ The christening *was* a grand affair,” continued Rochford. “ The Royal Highness and the Right Reverend Bishop were there, and the assemblage was altogether a very brilliant one. Major Wilmot, whom I had informed that Adeline and her relative would leave for Italy on the morrow, was in excellent spirits; Mrs. Wilmot never looked better—happier; and all went merry as a marriage bell,—when in a moment burst the thunder!

“ The drawing-room door was suddenly flung wide, and a loud, ringing voice—Forster’s—called out: ‘ Place for Mrs. Wilmot!—the true Mrs. Wilmot—Adeline Wilmot ! ’

“ As he spoke, Adeline, recognising Captain Serle in Major Wilmot, ran towards him, threw herself upon his bosom, and, clasping him round the neck, exclaimed, with gushing sobs of joy, ‘ Charles, beloved Charles ! ’

“ I may as well conclude,” said Rochford. “ You can imagine the rest.”

“ No, I cannot. What became of Wilmot ? ”

“ He died the next day *suddenly*; and there was no

inquest. By the bye, he had discovered that Adeline was his wife's sister, when looking over Penford's papers and letters; and he had seen Adeline and Mrs. Colson in the park the day he rode back to Berkeley square in such a deuce of a hurry."

"And the sisters?"

"They are still living. Emily watches with tenderest solicitude over Adeline, who is hourly expecting 'Charles, beloved Charles!' The children both died during infancy."

"Where do the sisters reside?"

"In Italy, under a fictitious name. I may not say more."

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 2.—THE MYSTERIES OF THE BILL-BOOK.

THIS pharisaical nineteenth century, which seemed never weary of giving thanks and praise to itself for immeasurable superiority in all things over every preceding one, has of late received some startling rebukes from unexpected quarters. Light has leaped out of the huge unsightly fissures that have suddenly yawned in its surface civilisation, precisely where the glittering crust was presumed to be solidest—most reliable—by which society may photograph its features with, we will hope, a salutary, if self-humbling truthfulness, vainly to be looked for at the hands of its portrait-painters in ordinary. It happens that, from position and other circumstances, I have neither been startled nor surprised by those, to many, utterly confounding

revelations. So familiar, indeed, have I long been with many of the dark secrets that palpitate and writhe beneath the flimsy veils—which the merest accident, a breath, may at any moment rend away—of seeming probity, seeming riches, seeming piety, that I am only astonished such discoveries are not very much more frequent than they are. But this morning, hardly ten minutes before I sat down to pen this narrative—and which but for that reminding circumstance might not have been penned—my heart leaped to my mouth as a highly respectable City name flashed upon me in the police columns of the *Times*: a second glance reassured me: The gentleman was only before the magistrate to give evidence against a lad he had seen pick a lady's pocket in the Crystal Palace. On Sunday next I propose going some distance to hear a reverend gentleman preach—and most admirably he does preach—who, if a saving miracle is not wrought in his favour, will, I much fear, and before long too, be either the inmate of a madhouse, or have perished by his own hand—with such vengeful fierceness does the unseen vulture tear at his heart!

“Who, then, are you,” the reader naturally asks, “that pretend to have penetrated to the Purgatorio and Inferno of man's inner life, and read the sad secrets shrouded there? A Romish priest, mayhap?” Nay, I am neither priest nor parson; but I have dwelt in many lands and enjoyed opportunities for

close observation, improved by the unconquerable inquisitiveness which has ever been my besetting weakness, or strength, so that my success in groping my way to dark conscience-crypts, and discerning there, with more or less distinctness, the shadowy skeletons with which most human homes are haunted, need surprise no one. Let me add, that I do not 'enter upon my self-imposed task in a spirit of smirking self-superiority : such a mood of mind would, in sooth, ill become me, for, albeit that I am honest enough as the world goes, *there is a skeleton in my own house*, which, unsuspected by friends or acquaintance, has dwelt with me since the golden days of youthful prime ; and as the shadows of the now swiftly-coming night of life gather around me, gleams with every passing hour into ghostlier distinctness.

Enough, at all events, for the present, of my own secret griefs. To-day, I have only sufficient courage to probe and lay bare those of others. Vaulting, therefore, over my first five-and-twenty years of life, I alight from a northern coach, in London, on a wet gloomy evening in 1827, the year of the great panic caused by a general collapse of the madly dilated paper-wings of commerce. To that catastrophe my arrival in the metropolis was wholly attributable ; the bank wherein I had been many years clerk having, upon the stoppage of the London establishment to which it was affiliated—Sir Peter Pole's—followed suit with an instant alacrity marvellous to the outer

world, though not at all so to me, who had some time before managed to make acquaintance with a terrific skeleton, confined, not confined, in a large iron safe, wherein was inscribed, in neatly painted white letters, "The Earl of —'s Bonds, Shares," &c.; and which we used to lower into the vaults every evening with the cash and book chests. Could we have let down his grim ghastliness to the centre of the earth, he would not, I am quite sure, have been the less constantly visible to the worthy banker; nor his mocking iteration of "the Earl of —'s bonds and shares" less distinctly audible to that much-respected individual. I had for some time suspected that those neatly painted white letters lied audaciously, and I one day found an opportunity of verifying that fact. That the banker surmised, or feared, I had possessed myself of his frightful secret, was made plain to me on the day his bank suspended payment, when I was at once dismissed with a handsome douceur, and half-a-dozen most flattering introductions to houses in London; amongst them, to Hamlet's, the eminent gold and silver smith at the east end of Coventry-street, Haymarket, who, Mr. — intimated, was in pressing need of a skilful accountant, and that I should act wisely in presenting myself there without delay. Moreover, every one of the letters, which were given me unsealed, expressed the writer's implicit reliance upon my "honour and discretion—qualities invaluable in persons intrusted with the confidence of their

employers ;" *ad misericordiam* phrases, addressed, I well understood, to myself, and which, though not needed for their real purpose, proved of service to me. I left the same evening for London; and the banker, relieved for a time of his worst fears—the Earl of —— being abroad, and likely to remain so for a long period—set the requisite machinery to work for effecting an arrangement with his creditors, in which he succeeded; the bank kept its staggering feet till his death, three years afterwards, when it went down with a crash, and great was the fall thereof.

The affairs of the house of Hamlet were already in the hands of official Philistines when I reached London; other firms, to whom I had recommendations, were actually, or proximately, in the same condition; only two of my introductory letters remained to be delivered; and I was standing in the Poultry, wearily watching the crowds of people pressing forward to the Bank to exchange their notes for gold—a demand which the Mint, by working night and day, could barely keep pace with—when my eye lit upon a number of Cobbett's *Register* just placed in a stationer's window. I had been long familiar with that wayward writer's currency crotchetts, and should not probably have bestowed a second glance on the publication, had it not been that poetry-despising William Cobbett had, for the first, and, I believe, last time in his life, headed his *Register* with a poetical quotation. It is from *Macbeth*:

Now be those juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense :
Who keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope. Accursed be they :
And damned all those that trust them !

Cobbett had so evidently been carried out of himself by delirious exultation over the downfall of so many “rag-rooks,” that, feeling somewhat anxious to read a *brochure* inspired by such a state of the Cobbett mind, I entered the shop to purchase it. I had no small-change about me, except some loose coppers in my breast coat-pocket; so, first taking out and placing upon the glass-case on the counter my two undelivered letters, I groped amongst the remaining sundries for the required sum. That accomplished, I received the *Register*, and was about to take up the letters, when a gentleman, who had been scrutinising, impertinently I thought, the addresses through his gold hand-glasses, said :

“One of your letters, young man—this one—is addressed to a person who died by his own hand about two hours since.”

“God bless me!” I exclaimed. “And the cause, sir?”

“Bankruptcy. Ruin! He is another victim of the senseless panic that is raging around us. But you, I suppose, agree with Mr. Cobbett, that bankers and bull-frog traders are noxious vermin, that it is a pleasure to see hunted down.”

" You are much mistaken, sir. Cobbett amuses me by the heartiness of his humour; but in monetary science I have long held him to be one of the veriest quacks that ever, by force of sheer impudence, imposed upon the folly of fools."

" That is a bold opinion from so young a man—and a young *countryman*, too, it is easy to perceive."

" May be so; but, as these letters testify, I have been familiar with finance, both in theory and practice, from boyhood."

" Indeed! May I cast my eye over one?"

" Certainly, sir;" and I handed him both.

Whilst he, with evident interest, peruses them, I will describe what manner of man he at first view seemed to be.

In years about forty-five, I thought, though a certain undefinable age-shadow, that now and then flitted over his sallow features, hinted at longer life than that, if reckoned by emotions and impressions, and not by years. There was nothing remarkable in his dress, except its scrupulous neatness. His frame was strong and unbowed, and his dark hair, though slightly silvered, was unthinned by time. His face was decidedly handsome, and not the less interesting to inquisitive me on account of the tremulous disquietude of his dark, changeful eyes. How nervous he was! The hasty entrance of a bustling customer caused him such a start that he let fall the letter he was reading! Were those symptoms only of the prevailing epidemic

—commercial embarrassment? or were more affrighting *spectra* than the Gazette and Court of Bankruptcy discernible by that keen, apprehensive glance in the dark distance?

These alike vain and unauthorised speculations were presently interrupted by Mr. Marshall, as we may call him, who, as he returned me the letters, and looked with keen scrutiny in my face, abruptly said: “If you have a few minutes to spare, I shall be glad to speak with you.”

I bowed assent, and followed him to a neighbouring tavern, every room of which we found filled with people in a state of extreme excitement, among whom such phrases as “national bankruptcy,” “suspension of cash-payments,” plentifully intermingled with curses of “Peel’s bill,” were bandied about on all sides.

“One can hardly hear one’s self speak here,” remarked Mr. Marshall; “but,” he added, drawing me towards the end of the passage, “what I have to say will require a very few words. You are strongly recommended, Mr. R——, in those letters by your former employer—whom by reputation I know something of—not only for rare skill as an accountant, but for tried honour and discretion. Now, I happen to want such a person, and if”——

Mr. John Marshall checked himself, again perused with sharp scrutiny my face, then said:

“Have you many acquaintances in London?”

“ Not one; neither relative nor acquaintance.”

That reply decided him, and it was quickly settled that I should enter his service the next day at a very liberal salary.

I was at Fenchurch-street punctually at the hour named, and was forthwith installed in Mr. Marshall’s private counting-house. He had, I found, a flourishing business, and the books, though there were arrears that required some time to get up, were well and methodically kept. He had also established a good discounting account at the Bank of England; which means, that all the acceptances he received, presumedly in the regular course of business, were as of course credited to him as cash, *minus* interest at the current rate —an often fatal facility, which, I was not long in discovering, had tempted him to discount the paper of a number of persons at a high rate of interest, himself, of course, pocketing the difference. That, however, was a section of his affairs of which I knew nothing, except as it was set forth in his bill-book; and to judge from that it was very profitable. All this being so, I came to the conclusion that it could not be to commercial difficulties that the dreadful depression of mind under which (as at first sight of him I had suspected) Mr. Marshall had habitually laboured, was attributable; a depression which often, when he thought himself unobserved, I have seen suddenly change to wordless frenzy, to gnashing of teeth, wild wringing of the hands, maniacal fighting with the air, as if he

were struggling in the gripe of some living, bodily foe !

Whence, then, arose that maddening disquietude ? Not from his family. His marriage had been one of affection ; and Mrs. Marshall was a singularly amiable woman, resembling in cast of features the French Empress ; though it may be I only fancy so because the line of pain across her forehead was the same, and as distinctly marked as that which gives such touching expression to the imperial brow of the beautiful Eugénie. They had, moreover, three children—Maria, Ellen, and Frances—bright-eyed, golden-haired elves, the eldest nine, the youngest four years old. In short, it must have been a home of paradise, but for the serpent coiled about the husband's heart, but for the fiend that whispered in the wife's ear vague, torturing hints of the true source of the cankering care that was eating away the life of the father of her children.

Suddenly the dark riddle was, I thought, made clear. Two females called at the warehouse during Mr. Marshall's absence : one a fierce-featured woman of between forty and fifty years of age ; the other, her daughter, and of a mild, dejected aspect. They would give no name ; but the mother said, with a kind of menace in her look and tone, that they would return towards the evening. They did so, just as I was mentioning the circumstance to Mr. Marshall. The elder woman pushed boldly into the counting-

house, dragging her daughter with her ; and a terrible scene ensued. The intruder's insolence was met by a torrent of derisive, rageful abuse. She was to the full as fierce and bitter ; and the fiery war of words was at length terminated by both being thrust into the street by Mr. Marshall ; and, as even then the virago's tongue continued to pour forth maledictions, she was finally given in charge to a city constable, and taken off to the lock-up house in Giltspur-street. Mr. Marshall himself left the office immediately afterwards for his private residence at Stamford-hill.

The next morning I was called into the private room ; and Mr. Marshall confided to my "honour and discretion" a troubled chapter of his early life. He and his father had been with hundreds of others seized by Napoleon Bonaparte at the rupture of the peace of Amiens, and detained in France as prisoner of war on parole. An intimacy ensued between them and an English family of the name of Curtis, who were similarly situated ; and in December 1804 John Marshall was wedded, by civil contract only, to Julia Curtis, the bride being in her twenty-sixth, the bridegroom in his twenty-second year. A most unhappy marriage it proved to be ; and so early did unappeasable discords arise between the ill-matched pair, that before the birth of a daughter in October 1805 legal steps had been taken by mutual consent to obtain its annulment ; and, the interval prescribed by the French law having expired, sentence of divorce was duly pronounced. The

child, which the father had never seen, was with his ready acquiescence consigned to the absolute guardianship of its mother ; and it was further agreed that an income of forty pounds per annum, which Julia Curtis had brought to the marital treasury, should revert to her.

"Directly peace was restored," continued Mr. Marshall, "I returned to England, engaged in business forthwith, and the following year, 1815, married my present wife. I heard nothing directly of the Curtises, till about three weeks ago, when I received a letter from the woman, Julia Curtis, you saw here yesterday. She had passed over from the Isle of Man, where she has for many years resided, to Yorkshire, to ascertain if anything could be got out of the guardian of her somewhat wealthy brother, Robert Curtis, who has been long hopelessly insane. He is known—Mr. Willesden, the said guardian, and an old friend of mine, has informed me—to have made a will in her daughter's favour when he was *compos mentis*; and she fancied it might be possible to obtain an advance of money upon the security of that instrument. Failing in that, and some silly fool having persuaded her that an English-woman once a wife is always a wife till divorced by death or act of parliament, she wrote to me, threatening that, unless a large sum of money was immediately sent to her, she would take legal proceedings for the enforcement of her rights."

"Common sense might have taught her that what

the French law could do, it might undo, especially as no religious ceremony took place."

"To be sure. Well, I took no notice of the preposterous letter; and what occurred yesterday you know. And now to finish, I trust for ever, with this hateful topic. Mrs. Marshall has urged me to make the woman a present of a hundred pounds. I consent to do so, upon condition that she solemnly promises never again to annoy me; and if you will arrange the matter for me, I shall be obliged."

I found no difficulty whatever in doing so. The fierce-willed *divorcée* before I reached the prison had seen a solicitor, who convinced her that she had no legal claim upon Mr. Marshall; and she gave the required promise not to molest that gentleman again, in exchange for his hundred-pound cheque, with alacrity, adding, of her own grace and favour, that they should sail on the morrow for Douglas, in the Isle of Man, by the *William and Mary*, a passenger and trading vessel lying in the Thames. The daughter seemed to be just as meek and docile as the mother was fierce and wilful; the poor girl sobbed aloud with emotion when I hinted to her, unheard by her mother, that the money was really a gift to *her* from Mr. Marshall, who did not forget—and, upon my solemn word, I fully believed what I was saying—that she was after all his child. "Bless him, bless him!" she murmured; "I have always thought of him with love and reverence."

It was unfortunate that I, though in all sincerity, had induced the young woman to believe that Mr.

Marshall thought of her with regretful tenderness, for it excited in her an irrepressible desire to see and speak with him alone before leaving London ; and, as soon as she could give her mother the slip, she hurried to Fenchurch-street for that purpose. I was not at the warehouse when she called, but I knew from a clerk, who partially witnessed what passed, that the scene was a painful one. Mr. Marshall, who could be cold as steel, hard as flint, received her with chilling indifference, and, quickly wearying of her prayers and protestations, forcibly ejected her, not with intentional violence, but still with so much force that the unhappy girl slipped and fell upon the pavement. Mr. Marshall raised her ; but, believing she had sustained no hurt, he re-entered his house, slamming the door after him ; and the heart-broken girl limped away, her right ankle having been strained by the fall. On the morrow, it was so much swollen, that her mother, with whom it was urgent to return at once to Douglas, was compelled to leave her behind in lodgings.

I was quite unaware of that circumstance, which would have much mitigated the shock I felt on reading about eight days afterwards the following paragraph in the shipping intelligence of the *Times* : ‘The *William and Mary*, Captain Hearn, from London, bound for Douglas, Isle of Man, was driven on shore at the island of Anglesea, during the late gale, and almost immediately went to pieces. The crew and passengers all perished.’

I silently placed the paper upon the desk before Mr.

Marshall with my finger upon the paragraph, and immediately left the counting-house. I saw him again ten minutes afterwards, and God forgive me if I mis-judge him, but there *did* seem to be a lustre upon his face as of a subdued vengeful exultation ! But I am, I know, prone to rash judgments.

The dark cloud that encompassed Mr. Marshall was not, however, lightened by that catastrophe ; and it was in another, and by me totally unsuspected direction, that the dread spectre of which it was the afore-mentioned shadow presently revealed itself.

The monetary and commercial panic had long since terminated, though its effects were still felt in the fall of houses that, shaken to their foundations by the financial earthquake, slipped from time to time through the make-shift, concealed props, that for a while sustained them, into cureless ruin. One of these was a firm whose paper Mr. Marshall had been in the habit of privately discounting, and when, upon seeing their name in the list of bankrupts, I turned hastily to the bill-book, I saw, to my dismay, that we had rediscounted acceptances of theirs to over four thousand pounds at the Bank of England ! This was a heavy blow, the more so that our account at the bank was not just then, from various causes, in a quite satisfactory state, and a hint had indeed been given us that the amount of our discounts must for the future be considerably restricted. Still the loss, if a total one, which was not likely, would not be ruin, and I was almost as much amazed as shocked at the effect the intelli-

gence from my lips produced upon Mr. Marshall. He stared as if thunder-smitten in my face for a few seconds, and then, realising the full horror of his position, turned as if to flee, staggered a few steps, and fell with a doleful cry upon the floor.

Fortunately, there was no one present or within hearing but myself, and I soon quietly restored him to consciousness—to consciousness, alas! that the hand of time was at last close upon that hour of which the prophetic tolling had for so many miserable months sounded in his ear!

I strove to calm his agitation by urging that the bank, which would, of course, as a matter of business, prove against the bankrupt's estate to the amount of the acceptances—not one of which was nearly due—would still hold them as against the acceptor till they reached maturity; and that, moreover, an excellent dividend might be rationally hoped for. I spoke to the winds; the wretched man heard as if not hearing me, and at last stopped my mouth, and for a time my breath, by suddenly exclaiming :

“ You speak of you know not what! Those bills, those acceptances are—are forgeries ! ”

“ Forgeries ! ”

“ Yes, forgeries! And—and I'll be poisoned with it no longer; all—all my private discounts—all the bills made payable here, and entered in red ink—are forgeries ! ”

“ Almighty powers! All in red ink—forgeries! Why, they are over nine thousand pounds ! ”

"Yes, yes—I know—I daresay! I have not dared to add them up for many a day. Miserable man that I am—infatuated fool that I have been! It commenced with three hundred pounds, to save my credit. Accursed credit! Would to God it had *not* been saved. And now—now," he went on to say, perceiving that I was utterly confounded, "will you, can you stand by me? I trust in you. You have a cool head, strong nerves; will you, for my wife, my children's sake, try to save me?"

I did not, could not immediately answer; but he had touched the right chord. For his children's sake! Yes, I would do much to shield their fair young lives from blight and sorrow so untimely and so terrible. I pledged my word, as soon as I could speak with calmness, that I would do so.

It was settled, during the long and gloomy conference which followed, that everything should be left to me, and that Mr. Marshall should keep close under pretence of illness—no pretence, by the way—at Stamford-hill, where I could see him every evening; lest, peradventure, his nervous terrors, now that the frightful peril he had incurred was become imminent, should betray him.

Eight clear days were before me in which to collect, without aid from discounts, 4,000*l.*; for on the ninth day the first meeting under the fiat in bankruptcy would take place, and the forged bills be tendered in proof against the estate of the acceptors. I succeeded

in raising the money, and not six hours too soon ; but there was still time to get possession of the bills without exciting suspicion or remark. I went over to the bank, and, with as unconcerned an air as I could assume, placed a list of the acceptances I required before the clerk who had the management of Mr. Marshall's account. Although I well remember it was a bitterly cold morning, and I heard people say that the Serpentine was frozen completely over during the night, my shirting, I know, was wringing wet, and my blood at fever-heat.

"Oh, you want those acceptances ?" said the clerk, after glancing over the list. "We intended proving upon them to-morrow. You do not, I hope, propose," he sharply added, "to withdraw them by a cheque ; because, your account being already a trifle over-drawn, I "——

"No, no," I interrupted ; "I bring you cash for them."

"Do you ? Why not, then, pay your cash into account, and let the bills run on to maturity ? "

"Because, my good sir, we can do better with them than prove under the bankruptcy."

"Ho, ho ! I understand ; you have an offer for your debt. But mind what you are about. The estate will cut up very well, I am told."

I said he might let us alone for that ; and, after another torturing ten minutes, I held the terrible bills in my hand, checked with difficulty a frantic impulse

to run, walked sedately out of the bank, and drove off to Stamford-hill.

So far successful; and, although there was still much nervous work to do, there was more time to do it in. I must do myself the justice to say that I persevered valiantly during the next four weeks, now elate with hope, now sunk in despair; and the nights were very much worse than the days; for so surely as I dozed off was either Mr. Marshall or I going to be hanged; Mrs. Marshall and the girls to be in some other way disastrously dealt with; and once I went through the whole process of being hanged, cut down, coffined, and buried, though still unaccountably alive, and able to read my own epitaph, written in red ink, upon a tombstone.

The main difficulties were at last surmounted; the accursed red list was reduced to three items, altogether about fourteen hundred pounds; in fact, the fearful race against time was as good as won, when I was suddenly tripped up and flung on my back, without chance of regaining my feet again, and in this way. Of course, the scraping together, in so short a time, of nine thousand pounds, over and above what was required for the ordinary outgoings, obliged me to make tempting allowances for prompt payments, and to press customers who thought themselves, and indeed were, entitled to longer credit; operations which could not but damage the character of our establishment; and one consequence was, that Mr. Jay, of Leadenhall-

street, a creditor for upwards of two thousand pounds, insisted upon being immediately settled with. That, as I told him, was quite out of the question; and we were next threatened with a writ, which I cared very little about, as we could have pleaded to it, and it would have been months before judgment was obtained. Finding I was not to be frightened, Mr. Jay went to Stamford-hill; and, although, fearful of some such trick, I had warned Mr. Marshall that he must see everybody that called, he was weak enough to bid the servant deny him. She did so to Mr. Jay, and the next day was bribed to make an affidavit of that fact (she at least did make the affidavit, and I certainly *saw* no bribe given), which, of course, established a clear act of bankruptcy; and Mr. Jay sent me notice that if he was not paid by four o'clock on the following day, a docket would be struck against Mr. Marshall, without further notice.

I went to Mr. Jay, but he was deaf to remonstrances—though, if he had been treated with the same harshness about two years previously, he would not have been the big man he then was—and I took my way to Stamford-hill to warn my unhappy principal of the fatal turn that, through his own folly, affairs had taken.

The announcement was a renewed dagger-stroke, so to speak; though, outwardly, he was less violently agitated than I had seen him, and a suspicion which had before crossed my mind that he had secretly armed

himself with some potent means of avoiding public shame, forcibly recurred. Seeing no possible means of withdrawing the three remaining *red* acceptances from the bank, I urged immediate flight; promising, of course, to do all in my power to soften the blow to his wife, who, I had ascertained, apprehended nothing worse than ordinary bankruptcy. Mr. Marshall listened gloomily, with his hands on his knees, and his eyes fixed vacantly on the fire; till, suddenly recollecting I had a note for him, I said:

“By the bye, sir, I have a note for you—left at the office, Roberts told me, by a Mr. Willesden.”

“Mr. Willesden! Let me see.”

Mr. Marshall opened the note, read it, started up, and paced to and fro the room in a state of great excitement for a few moments; then, suddenly arresting his steps, he exclaimed, as he shook me by the hand: “Good-night. God bless you. I shall be at the warehouse by nine—perhaps earlier. Good-night, good-night!”

Here was apparently a new and promising turn of the wheel. I had a notion of having heard the name of Willesden, but when or from whom I could not recollect. A rich friend or relative, I hoped, just turned up in the very nick of time, as they always do in plays. And it proved so! Mr. Willesden called at the warehouse precisely at nine; saw, and had a long conference with Mr. Marshall; left, as did Mr. Marshall, but not with him; and both returned within ten

minutes of each other. Their second interview was a brief one; and very soon after Mr. Willesden left I was summoned by Mr. Marshall. His face was as white, I afterwards remembered, as its natural sallowness permitted, and there shone a light in his eyes as of fever, or intense excitement.

"Take this cheque," he said, "and when you have cashed it arrange with Jay. No doubt he will take half down; in which case you can settle the other matter. This very afternoon were better, if it can be done quietly."

The cheque was drawn upon Jones Loyd and Co., for 2,700*l.*, in favour of John Marshall or bearer, by Richard Willesden. I seized and posted off with it without a word, hardly feeling my feet for uplifting joy, when—wonder upon wonders!—the ghost, as I for half a heart-beat deemed it, of Julia Curtis the younger tapped me on the shoulder and arrested my eager steps. She looked very thin and ill; and I soon understood how it was she had not sailed with her mother in the *William and Mary*, and that she, moreover, had been so unwell that she had not left her room till the day previously. "And I should not be here now," she continued, "but for a letter which has reached me, in a round-about way, from Douglas, intimating that a Mr. Willesden has gone to London to inquire about us, and that he purposes calling for that purpose upon Mr. Marshall of Fenchurch-street, who, he has heard, is likely to know where we are. So,"

added the young woman, "I thought I would wait here, taking my chance of seeing you, as I did not dare, you know, to call at the office."

"Come with me," I exclaimed, "to Jones Loyd and Co. It is very likely they may know where Mr. Willesden is stopping. If not, I will ask Mr. Marshall."

I was about to ask the clerk who cashed the cheque if he knew where the drawer was to be found, when, chancing to look toward a distant part of the bank, I saw Mr. Willesden. He had apparently finished the business that called him there, and, accosting him, I said :

"There is a young woman outside who wishes to speak with Mr. Willesden."

"What is the young woman's name?"

"Julia Curtis."

"What Julia Curtis?"

"Julia Curtis, sir, the younger. Here she is."

"Miss Curtis!" he exclaimed. "Can I believe my eyes? Why, I was assured by Mr. Marshall hardly ten minutes since, that you were too ill to leave your lodgings at Cheshunt."

"My lodgings at Cheshunt!" echoed the mystified girl.

"Yes. Upon my word, there is some strange mystery here. Come with me; we will seek Mr. Marshall at once."

During that brief dialogue, a dreadful suspicion was

flashing through my brain; and, with a look and gesture, supplicatory of silence, to Julia Curtis, I hurried away to Fenchurch-street. The crossings and crowds hindered me; but at length I burst, panting and breathless, into the office. Mr. Marshall was still there, and standing with his back to the fire.

“What has happened?” he exclaimed, before I could speak.

“I do not know. Mr. Willesden has met with Julia Curtis: they will be here immediately.”

He started as if shot, and grasped the mantel-piece for support.

“Here they are,” I wildly exclaimed, and rushed out into the warehouse to meet and whisper a warning word to the young woman, who, I felt, would not, for the world’s wealth, betray her father knowingly.

I snatched her away, as it were, from Mr. Willesden’s arm, and in a few brief sentences intimated the purport of my fears and suspicions. She replied by an assuring pressure of her hand. “He is saved,” I mentally ejaculated; and, looking up at the moment, I saw Mr. Marshall’s white face at the office-window, looking into the warehouse—a ghastly face, and instantly withdrawn.

I hastened forward with Julia Curtis, preceding Mr. Willesden, and exclaiming aloud: “All right—all right! Mr. Marshall, Miss Curtis presents her respects to you.”

Mr. Marshall was standing with his hands resting

upon a table in front of him, in a rigid, upright posture, and a mocking expression seemed to glitter in his eyes, and play about his lips. He spoke not—moved not, nor did either of us for a few moments ; and then Julia Curtis sprang towards him, screaming, “Father!—dear father!” The unfortunate man feebly strove to remove her clasping arms, murmured something—Ellen, I thought—his wife’s name—and fell forward on the table.

Help, swiftly as it came, arrived too late; John Marshall was dead !

I have but a few words to add. Mr. Marshall had received the cheque for and on behalf of Julia Curtis, whose name was signed to the receipt which he had given to Mr. Willesden. The money was part of what she was entitled to under the will of Robert Curtis, deceased ; and Mr. Marshall had represented that, at that particular moment, such a sum would be of great service to her. He, of course, believed that Julia Curtis was drowned, and must, I think, have intended to return Mr. Willesden the money at some future period. Possibly, however, in the harassed and confused state of his mind, he only knew that such a sum would for the times havehim.

His secret was faithfully kept ; the three *red* acceptances were quietly obtained and destroyed, and the business was disposed of much more advantageously than I expected. One word more : the coroner’s inquest, guided by the confident dictum of the medical

gentleman who attended Mr. Marshall for the four or five weeks previous to his decease, that he had died of disease of the heart, did not think a *post mortem* examination of the body was required, and returned a verdict of Natural Death. My own conviction does not harmonise with that verdict.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 3.—THE “THREE SISTERS.”

ABOUT five-and-forty years ago, Mr. Robert Oakley, merchant of Bristol, and otherwise a highly respectable person, was enjoying the last afternoon remaining to him of his annual fortnight's respite from business among the cliffs and caves and downs of Freshwater, in the Isle of Wight. Mr. Oakley was at that time a man of mature age. More than forty winters glittered in his sharp grey eyes; and the glossy blackness of his plainly-cut, well-fitting coat, the spotless fitness of his linen, his elaborately-brushed broad-brimmed hat, and highly-polished cork-sole shoes, plainly announced a person with whom the world went smoothly. It had been for some time blowing hard, and the wind was momently increasing in violence; but Mr. Oak-

ley, who was an enthusiastic admirer of sea scenery, with the help of a stout gold-headed walking-cane, resolutely stood his ground, and watched, with apparently untiring interest, the white-crested waves dash themselves in fierce pursuit of each other upon the shingly shore, or, where checked and hurled for an instant back by the Rock Needles, leap and hiss in fierce derision above the summits of the vainly obstructing masses, and sweep on as madly as before. Now and then a fishing-boat, or a larger vessel, drove past—in imminent danger, to his unpractised eye, of immediate engulfment, or of destruction on the iron shore ; and a feeling of comfortable self-gratulation simmered at the merchant's heart, as the comparison of his own safety with the danger of those on board involuntarily but vividly suggested itself. At length a rapid change in the driving clouds overhead, from light fleecy strips to dark heavy patches, increasing in size and density, and the consequent quick darkening of the atmosphere, warned him that the fitful gusts of heavy rain which struck his face so sharply were but the precursors of a violent land as well as sea storm, from which it would be prudent to escape with all possible despatch. The light on the corner of the Wight shot forth over the fierce waters as he turned homewards, instantly followed by a vivid flash of lightning and a heavy thunder-peal ; so that, even in the opinion of the lately delighted admirer of sea and shore sublimity, a more wild, desolate, and disagreeable scene than now dimly

and fitfully presented itself could scarcely be imagined. Fortunately, however, he could not be, he thought, more than about four or five miles from Yarmouth. Little more than an hour's smart walking would take him there, and then a change of apparel and a cup of tea would remedy and obliterate all inconveniences. Thus self-assured and confident, Mr. Oakley strode manfully forward in his rugged, circuitous road, unconscious of the deadly peril lying in wait for him in that secure hour, and brief, undreaded path. While he is struggling along in the growing darkness and drenching rain, I shall have time to note down a few traits of his moral character—a knowledge of which is essentially necessary to an accurate appreciation of his past and future actions.

Mr. Robert Oakley, of Wine-street, Bristol, was known in that city as an *Irish* merchant—a designation applied, in ports trading largely with the sister country, to persons whose exports and imports are confined to Ireland. As much less capital is required in such a commerce than the merchant princes, whose enterprise embraces the whole habitable globe, can boast of, its chief men take a considerably lower mercantile rank on mart and 'Change than their richer brethren. Especially in those palmy days of flourishing slave and sugar islands, the West India merchant and proprietor stood high above his fellows, and nowhere more so than in the wealthy western metropolis of England. By no one were these magnates of com-

merce held in higher, more envious reverence, than by Mr. Robert Oakley. "How contemptible," he had often, but more especially of late, bitterly reflected, "how utterly insignificant are the poor twelve or thirteen thousand pounds—not certainly more than that—which the ceaseless industry of twenty of the best years of my life has enabled me to scrape together, compared with the colossal fortunes rapidly accumulated by men who, playing with vast ventures, frequently gain more, much more, at a single hit, than I do by a whole year of plodding perseverance and patient care!" As these thoughts gloomed across his mind, the true respectability of his position, his solid, if not extensive wealth, depending on none of the frightful chances which frequently sweep away at a blow the Aladdin fortunes of great speculators, dwindled in his estimation into coarse beggar-wrappings—useful, indeed, for the common necessities of life, but only to be worn with humility, almost with shame, in the presence of the robes and furred gowns of the really rich men of the world.

With such repinings rankering at his heart, it is not to be supposed that Robert Oakley had not frequently cast about for one of those great and lucky ventures, one of those Napoleonic strokes, whereby immense results, the natural reward of a lifetime of ordinary energy and success, are secured by one fortunate turn of the commercial dice. He was ever looking out for such an opportunity, but none had hitherto

presented itself sufficiently free from *hazard* to induce him, however momentarily dazzled, to boldly venture his fortunes upon it; and up to the time we left him on the bleak cliffs of Freshwater, he had been able to boast that, though often sorely tried, he had successfully withstood temptation—a result he owed somewhat to his naturally cautious, nervous temperament, to his dread of awakening the wolfish instincts of greed he felt to be latent within him, and which, he knew, required to be but once alimented with suddenly, easily acquired gold, to start into vigorous untameable life; but more, much more, than to any physical or mental qualities of his own, to the affectionate and wise counsels of his excellent wife, who, ever on the watch for such aberrations, gently drew him back from the contemplation of the deceptive shadow gleaming in the faithless waters, to the beaten paths of common-sense and the safe retreats of home and competence.

Well had it been for Mr. Robert Oakley had these frequent trials and temptations taught him the highest as well as the most useful of all virtues—humility—a wise distrust of himself. Unfortunately they generated only arrogance of spirit—pride of heart—that pride which ever goeth before a fall; and an inordinate contempt for the feebler men whom he had seen fall irretrievably on the slippery path where he had himself so frequently stumbled. One of these unlucky ones was his only brother, Richard Oakley, who, endowed by nature with a quicker, a more sanguine

temperament than himself, less wisely guided by marital counsel and advice, perhaps also more strongly tempted, had rashly speculated with the fortune bequeathed him by his father—five thousand pounds, the same sum that Robert inherited—and the common result of such bold leaps in the dark had awaited him—bankruptcy, ruin! He had married a lady of Belfast of the name of Neville, still young, although a widow, and the mother of one child, a boy. She brought no other fortune to her husband than beauty, innocence of heart, inextinguishable gaiety of temper, and yielding gentleness of disposition—admirable qualities, but, uncombined with the English gravity and prudence which distinguished her quiet, thoughtful sister-in-law, helped nothing to prevent, if indeed they did not hasten, a catastrophe which they could, however, cheer and soften. Perhaps Mrs. Richard Oakley never so truly loved her frank-tempered, facile-minded husband—certainly she never before exhibited such thoughtful tenderness—as when, scantily equipped for a new contest with the triumphant, mocking world, they bade adieu to the proud city that witnessed their vain and brief prosperity, and subsequent deep humiliation, and went forth in search of happier, if humbler fortunes.

“ You must not imagine,” said Robert Oakley coldly, in reply to his brother, who, with his wife, had, with downcast looks and hesitating steps, entered his counting-house in Wine-street—“ you must

not imagine that other men have not been tempted by glittering baits, because they have not foolishly yielded to the seduction. I, too, have felt—all men, I imagine, have felt at times—the feverish appetite for sudden, inordinate gain which prompts the gamester whether he play on 'Change or at less reputable places; but I have striven with and conquered the evil impulse. Feeble spirits, unable to withstand such temptations, should flee from them."

" You, Robert, were always of a more reserved and cautious disposition than I."

" Possibly ; still "—

" Besides," interrupted the weeping partner of the broken man—" besides being married to so discreet, so good, so excellent a wife. Ah, Richard," she added with an outburst of self-accusing grief, " had you never seen me, this calamity might never have befallen you ! "

" Alice ! " exclaimed her husband with reproachful tenderness—" Alice, this to me ! "

" We had better not waste time in profitless regrets for the past," said Robert Oakley. " I am glad for your sakes, as well as mine, that you have determined on leaving Bristol. I promised you two hundred pounds: my wife has persuaded me into making it five hundred, and I do so on the express understanding of course that this gift is to be a final one."

" Bless her—bless her ! " sobbed the grateful wife. " But God *has* blessed her, and for her sake hers."

"Here are notes," continued the elder brother, "for two hundred pounds, and a bill for three hundred, due in London the day after to-morrow, which I discounted for Sir Martin Biddulph."

"Of Oatlands?"

"Yes; horse-racing and other noble and manly sports will, I doubt not, some day or other bring the owner of that fine property to the dogs. This bill will, however, I am pretty sure, be punctually paid. If not, I have indorsed it, and the London agents of the bankers here shall have instructions to pay it for my honour."

Little more was said, and Richard Oakley, with his wife, passed out of the counting-house into an inner room, where not cold service, but the warm sympathy of a gentle, loving heart, awaited them.

"You will not forget to write frequently, very frequently, to *me*?" said Mrs. Robert Oakley as she strained her sister-in-law in a parting embræe. "And Caroline—you will not forget Caroline, I know, any more than we shall Harry, or sweet little Alice? This is for her," she added in a whisper: "not a word, dear, if you love me—for her, not you."

Fourteen years had elapsed since this parting and the afternoon when Mr. Robert Oakley, as upright, physically and morally, as ever, and now rich to the extent of about twelve thousand pounds, found himself suddenly overtaken by a heavy squall of wind and rain on the storm-beaten cliffs of the Isle of Wight. The

distance he had to walk proved longer and more difficult of accomplishment than he had found it in the broad daylight a few hours previously, and he gladly availed himself of the opportune shelter offered by a small tavern at Freshwater to rest and refresh himself before attempting the one or two miles which, he was told, still intervened between him and Yarmouth.

There was a blazing fire in the bar-parlour of the little inn, tenanted only by a few comfortable, farmer-looking persons, and one or two unmistakable specimens of the half-seaman, whole-smuggler tribe, which at that period swarmed along the southern coast. Their conversation—a very animated one—ceased abruptly on the entrance of the stranger; but at the sight of his pinched features and dripping garments, evidently not those of a gauger—and the company there assembled were first-rate judges on the point—they with rough but ready courtesy drew back from the fire, round which they had been seated, discussing war-politics and hot spirits and water, and invited him to approach and dry himself. He very readily complied with the invitation, and by the time the tea which he had ordered on entering was brought in and placed, at his request, on a small table as distant as possible from that of the tobacco-smokers, his chilled limbs, wet clothes, and ruffled temper, were pretty nearly restored to their normal condition; and he felt quite prepared to resume his journey as soon as the

abatement of the rain, doubtfully hoped for by the weather-wisdom of the room, should enable him to do so with prudence. Thus recomposed, he sat quietly down to tea, and had just finished it, when his attention was sharply aroused by the noisy entrance of two rough fellows in shaggy jackets and "sou-wester" caps, pilots, it presently appeared, who had been out some days in the Channel, and had now brought up a schooner, bound from Shoreham to Poole, in the Yarmouth roads.

"A dirty night coming on, I'm thinking, Bob Shelden?" remarked a fat, rosy-jowled person, seated cosily by the fire, as soon as the new-comers were fairly settled in their chairs.

"You said coming on, Farmer Gage?" replied the gentleman so familiarly addressed, in a dry, rasping voice, which the large tumbler of brandy and water he had already thrown down his throat could have done nothing to liquefy or soften—"you said coming on? It would blow the horns off a bull at the back of the Wight *now*, so it's to be hoped there ain't much more coming on, or the *Mary-Ann* will part her cable in Yarmouth roads. A light, Jack. Thanks! This 'bacca," he added, after indulging in a few delicious whiffs—"this 'bacca is a very creditable article, considering it was never christened in a customhouse.

"Stow that, Bob Shelden!" interrupted one of the party, hastily taking the pipe from his mouth, and jerking the point of it over his shoulder in the direction

of Mr. Robert Oakley's dark corner. "Stow that, my hearty!"

Bob Shelden paused in his agreeable pastime, and, shading his eyes with his hand, peered curiously in the direction indicated by his cautious friend. The examination must have been satisfactory, as he quickly and quietly resumed his pipe and the conversation.

"The gale was fortunately right aft, Farmer Gage; but, just to give you a notion of what a screamer it is outside, we've been but little odds of six hours coming from Guarnsey to Yarmouth roads, besides boarding and bringing in the schooner over the bargain."

"That's a smart run, that is, Bob," observed one of the seamen; "but you had the tide from the Caskets."

"Ay, lad, that's true."

"Anything at Guarnsey likely to be coming our way?"

"Well, there's a sloop-of-war lying there with a prize she'll be bringing in to Portsmouth; and there's a large barque, that put in two or three hours before we left, loaded with rum and sugar. She's been knocking about for the last three weeks everywhere but where she ought to be, and last Sunday's paper, I mind, said she was supposed to be either lost or carried into a French port. She's had her bulwarks stove in, and has lost her boats, with some other damage; but the cargo, they said, was all safe and sound. She'll come in, I daresay, in a day or two."

"I don't remember hearing about her; where does she hail from?"

"She's the *Three Sisters*, of Bristol, Captain Paulding, or some such name. Hollo, friend! what the devil are you upsetting and smashing the old woman's tea-tackle for, eh?"

In suddenly jumping up, Mr. Oakley had overturned the little table upon which the tea-equipage was arranged. He hurriedly apologised for his carelessness, took up his hat and cane, threw a guinea on the table, and strode hastily out of the house, much to the astonishment of the spectators—who, however, having ascertained that the guinea was a genuine one, charitably concluded that the stranger was a *gentleman*, though apparently rather crazed in his wits.

"It's very likely," said Bob Shelden, "that he has some concern in the barque I was mentioning. I saw Tom Hardy speak to him in the street at West Cowes last week. You know Tom Hardy, Farmer Gage?"

"Ay, lad, for one of the cleverest scamps in all creation. He's lost the situation I hear he had at Bristol, and is back again, I suppose, to live upon his poor old mother."

"I daresay. I'm thinking this gentleman was Tom's master. I'll ask the first time I see him."

"Very likely; and, as you say, concerned in the barque: if not, he must be crazed."

Crazed indeed! The words of the pilot had smitten him with frenzy, and he hurried along towards Yarmouth, his brain reeling and his blood on fire with the suddenly-awakened and maddening lust of gold—

gold in glittering, enormous heaps, to be obtained at no risk—"No risk!" he almost shrieked, "save, save"—the pale thought *would* flit dimly, if only momentarily, across his throbbing brain—"save to his peace of mind, his moral life, his perilled soul!" "Cummings, Brothers," he presently muttered, regaining the hurried current of his previous thoughts: "Cummings, Brothers, the richest house in Bristol! It will scarcely ruin them; besides, they would do the same. who would not? Fair, quite fair; everything is fair, they say, in war and trade. A strange chance: she was reported lost or captured when I left Bristol, and must now be quite given up. A rare chance! A glorious, golden opportunity, which, once missed, could never be regained. It shall *not* be missed!" and he quickened his already almost running pace towards Yarmouth. He was soon there, and at once hastened to the little quay. It was solitary and silent, but for the howling wind and furious sea that beat against, around, and over it. Oakley was surprised that pilots and fishermen should all have retired so early; for, strange as it may appear, the tumult, the tempest of emotion by which he was internally tossed and shaken, had rendered him not only regardless, but unconscious of the still-increasing storm which raged without. He was reluctantly turning to depart, when a heavy, lopping step was heard, and presently a seaman, in enormous jack-boots, and carrying a lantern in his hand, was seen approaching. Oakley hurried to meet and accost him.

"Can I be put across to Lymington?" he eagerly demanded.

"Across to Lymington!" echoed the sailor. "Why, who that isn't running from the gauger or the gallows would risk crossing on such a night as this?"

"I," replied Oakley, "who am running from neither, would—*will*, if a seaman is to be found in Yarmouth who is not afraid of venturing a couple of miles in a capful of wind."

"A capful!" rejoined the man. "Let me look at you?" and he suddenly held the lantern up to his questioner's features. "Ay!" he exclaimed, after a curious gaze, "I have not lived so long on the coast without having at times seen such a face as that; though never, thank God, in the shaving-glass! You must go, I see; that's plain enough. Well, I'll take you across."

"Immediately?"

"Of course."

"I will be here in five minutes."

"Stop, stop! The fare: what do you think of paying for the risk of four men's lives—saying nothing of your own? It will require four hands to manage the boat in this wild sea."

"Name your own terms."

"Ten guineas: that is, ten one-pound notes and ten shillings, which, the law says, are equal to ten guineas: though they're not by a long chalk."

"Agreed: I will not keep you waiting long."

One chance of safety still remained to the self-righteous, pride-blinded Pharisee, who had glibly boasted of his power to stand, undizzied and secure, on the edge of precipices so often fatal to better men than he: his wife, the good genius that had so often saved him from moral wreck, he must see her before setting out on his hasty journey; and if she were to divine his errand, he might yet be saved—or baffled, as in his present mood he would have deemed it. He paused at the threshold of his lodgings, in doubt what excuse for his precipitate departure would be least likely to awaken her solicitude—to arouse her fears. He did not remain long undecided: meanness, falsehood, duplicity, professed their ready services; and he knocked sharply at the door. It was instantly opened, for he was waited for, and had been for some time anxiously expected. He ran briskly up stairs.

“Caroline, child, where is your mother?”

“In bed, papa; she has been poorly all the afternoon, and has just lain down.”

The husband felt a strong emotion of pleasure at this announcement; not, certainly, at hearing that his wife, whom he tenderly loved, was ill—suffering, perhaps; but that, in the comparatively obscure atmosphere of her chamber, that mild but searching glance, which he had often felt penetrate to the very depths of his being, could not so well read his countenance as in the glare of the sitting-room. He immediately went to her, and, after a few affectionate inquiries, said, “What letters have arrived?”

"Several," was the reply; "they are on the dressing-table."

Mr. Oakley took up one, hastily broke the seal, and, with his back towards the bed, feigned to peruse it. Presently he uttered an exclamation of surprise, and turned quickly round.

"From Danby, love, requiring my instant return. Riley of Belfast is likely to stop payment; and Danby urges that either he or I should go over by the packet which leaves Bristol at eleven o'clock to-morrow forenoon."

"How unfortunate! Is the debt large?"

"Between six and seven hundred pounds."

"Dear me! But you cannot possibly reach home in time."

"Not unless I start at once by way of Lymington, in which case I could easily reach Salisbury in time for the mail from Southampton to Bristol."

"But it seems to be blowing a hurricane. Surely there would be danger in venturing across to Lymington on such a night!"

"Nonsense, Mary; with the wind in the present quarter, the sea between the two shores is quite smooth."

Finally, it was determined that he should set out at once; Mrs. Oakley and her daughter to follow, on the day after the morrow, at their leisure. His preparations did not occupy more than a couple of minutes, and, hastily embracing his wife and child, he hurried out of the house, and soon reached the quay. The boat was

ready, and he was instantly embarked. The passage was a frightful one ; twice the men seemed disposed to give up the attempt, and would have done so but for the almost frenzied supplications and promises of their passenger, who appeared insensible not only to fear, but to the benumbing effects of the drenching rain and sea that almost drowned them where they sat. At last the boat shot into the small harbour of Lymington ; the men were liberally rewarded ; and a quarter of an hour afterwards a postchaise and four started from the Angel Inn, and dashed at a rattling pace through the New Forest towards Salisbury. Mr. Oakley, occupied with eager calculations upon the extent of his probable gains, and the best, least suspicious mode of securing the prize almost within his reach, heeded not the passing of time, and, at the end of about three hours' smart ride, was startled by the sudden pulling up of the chaise, and the announcement that he had reached the entrance of the city of New Sarum. He at once alighted, dismissed the carriage, and walked quietly, for he found he had a full quarter of an hour to spare, to the Red Lion at the further end of the town, craftily anxious that the guard and coachman, who knew him well, should not become aware that he had made any extraordinary effort to overtake the mail. When the coach arrived, there was fortunately one inside place vacant ; he secured it, and early on the following morning safely reached Bristol.

Never had the attire of Mr. Robert Oakley appeared

more elaborately neat, more scrupulously spotless, nor his air and manner more placidly courteous and obliging, than when he walked gravely forth on the forenoon of his arrival to the place where merchants most do congregate. Salutations in the marketplace, congratulations upon his return to home and business, were abundant, almost overpowering. Mr. Robert Oakley, nevertheless, bore his honours meekly, and passed quietly on to the merchants' newsroom, where, at that time of the day, he knew he should be tolerably sure of meeting with one of the firm of Cummings, Brothers. He was not disappointed. The eldest partner was there, looking as gloomy as Mr. Oakley could wish. No tidings of the *Three Sisters* had yet, it was quite clear, reached Bristol. They exchanged a matter-of-course greeting, and Oakley passed on. About ten minutes afterwards Cummings, senior, having finished the perusal of the journals, rose to depart; and Mr. Oakley, suddenly remembering that he had an order from an Irish correspondent for some sugars, accosted him, and they proceeded together to the great firm's place of business. There the conversation, after a sufficient interval devoted to other topics, was adroitly turned by Robert Oakley upon the missing ship, and the enormous rates of insurance offered by the owners, and refused by all the underwriters. The firm of Cummings, Brothers, were often, generally indeed, except under peculiar circumstances, their own insurers—that is to say, they, having an immense number

of shipments, instead of certainly sacrificing the large sums they must have paid to effect so many insurances, preferred to set them apart to meet and cover any particular loss. This system they had generally found answer. They were now, however, and had been for a considerable time of course, anxious to effect an insurance on the *Three Sisters* at almost any premium. This state of affairs was thoroughly known and understood by Mr. Oakley, and the ultimate result was, after much fencing and coquetting on his part, that he suffered himself to be persuaded into a transaction by which, for the present payment of £10,000, he purchased the entire cargo of the missing ship, should she not have been lost or captured. A cheque for £6,000—all the present cash he had at his banker's—and a promissory-note at sixty days for the balance, were given with admirably feigned reluctance to Cummings, Brothers. The bills of lading and other documents were handed to Mr. Robert Oakley, and the bargain was complete—Cummings, Brothers, glad to have saved so much out of what they had deemed a total loss, and Oakley secretly exultant with the rapturous conviction that the ambition of his life had by one fortunate stroke been accomplished, or, to speak more soberly, that the means were now within his grasp by which, prudently brought into play—and he resolved to be very prudent—the colossal fortune of which he had so long dreamt might be swiftly and safely built up. Happy, fortunate Robert Oakley!

"Happy, fortunate Robert Oakley!" echoed all Bristol, except, indeed, the astounded firm of Cummings, Brothers, when, on the fourth day after this transaction, the *Three Sisters* was signalled to have safely anchored in the roads! The incense which the world freely burns before whatever idol fortune chooses to set up—noisy felicitations of envious hearts, mouth-honour, breath—was lavished abundantly upon the lucky speculator, and, best of all, no one appeared in the slightest degree to suspect that an enormous fraud had been committed—a gigantic swindle—whatever the letter of the law might call it—been perpetrated! Fortunate Robert Oakley!

Yes: one! He could not look steadily in his wife's countenance as he communicated to her the wonderful hit he had made, but in that momentary glance he had read—instead of joy, exultation, rapture—anxious bewilderment, vague, undefined alarm. He hastily changed the subject, after confusedly endeavouring to underrate greatly the magnitude of his enormous gains. He then left the apartment, and a long time elapsed before the subject was again mentioned between them.

Vexatious that any cloud, however slight and transient, should obscure the brightness of such a joyous day! The momentary irritation was, however, soon forgotten by the merchant when seated a few minutes afterwards in his private room, every faculty absorbed in elaborate calculations of the value of the cargo of the *Three Sisters*—the cost of freight, and other im-

portant items. A respectful tap at the door disturbed him.

“What is it, Danby?” he asked in an impatient, querulous tone.

“Thomas Hardy desires to see you, sir, immediately, on, he says, important business.”

“Thomas Hardy! Have I not repeatedly given orders that the fellow should not be allowed to enter my premises?”

“True, sir; but he will this time take no denial. He bade me say he has an especial message for you from a person at whose house you drank tea last Thursday evening in the Isle of Wight.”

“Isle of Wight!” stammered Oakley; the indignant expression of his countenance changed instantly to that of pale alarm. “Isle of Wight!”

“That, sir, is his message.”

“Bid him—bid him come in,” said Mr. Oakley as he dropped back into the chair from which he had risen to admit the clerk. “I—I will see him.”

Danby, in his turn greatly surprised, withdrew, and presently returned ushering in a tall, spare, shabbily-dressed man of about thirty years of age. He was not positively ill-looking; his features, separately considered, were well enough; but there was a sinister sneer about his thin, colourless lips, a fawning malignancy playing in his deep-set eyes, that rendered his shallow visage excessively repulsive.

“You may retire, Mr. Danby,” said Oakley. The

clerk obeyed, and the merchant and his unwelcome visitor were alone together. The interview lasted about a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time the door opened, and both passed into the clerk's counting-house.

"Mr. Hardy will resume his situation to-morrow morning," said the merchant hurriedly. Danby, perfectly startled, looked hastily up. His employer's face he saw was deadly pale, and he appeared much agitated; he, however, repeated the order in reply to Danby's mute expression of surprise, and immediately turned back towards his private apartment, Hardy at the same moment passing out of the front door into the street.

The next morning the re-engaged clerk was early at the office—well-dressed too—and rose quickly in the apparent good graces of his employer, of whose rapidly-extending business, and always more or less successful speculations, he very speedily became the chief and only confidential agent and adviser. All appeared to be sunshine and prosperity with the lucky merchant; and, as if to stamp the sudden fortunes of the Oakley family with unquestionable solidity and permanence, a distant relative, who had scarcely noticed him when a comparatively obscure person, now that he, according to the world's report, bade fair to become one of the millionaires of the country, bequeathed him, by a will dated but a few days before death, the sum of £30,000, in trust for his daughter Caroline, into whose absolute

possession it was to pass, with accumulated interest, on the day she attained her majority. Never was there, everybody said, a more fortunate man. A seat in parliament—a baronetcy—higher splendours even than that, but not to be named till clutched—already glittered in the distance.

One, as yet distant, prophetic death-note alone mingled and jarred with these gay joy-bells. The sympathising partner of his earlier and better life—his gentle, true-hearted wife always—was visibly descending with swift steps towards the tomb. She had been long in delicate health; but from about the period of her husband's sudden accession of wealth it had rapidly given way; and now, when it was already March, he was told by the physician, in the quaint phrase of the country, “that his wife would never get up May-Hill.” He was deeply shocked, and yet—so strangely was he already changed—the announcement was not wholly painful. She had never felt, never expressed any, the slightest, satisfaction at the brilliant turn his fortunes had taken; and, worse still, had constantly refused, anxious as he had been to surround her with luxuries of all kinds, to sanction the slightest addition to their modest establishment—was, in fact, far more rigidly economical than before; appearing to shrink from any contact with his new wealth as from pollution—while he dared not press her closely for her reasons. One only of the late events seemed to have afforded her pleasure, and that was the legacy to her daughter

Caroline. For that bequest, though certainly the very reverse of mercenary, she had expressed unbounded thankfulness. Would not, then, her removal be a relief—almost, he felt, though he hardly dared whisper it to his own heart, a blessing?

Whatever it might prove, it was not long delayed. Each succeeding day found her paler, thinner, weaker: the frail covering of mortality seemed to fall visibly off, and reveal in hourly-increasing excellence and beauty the stainless and gentle spirit panting to be freed from its decaying prison-house. The patiently-awaited and all undreaded hour, the calm evening, illumined and made glorious by the radiant purity of her well-spent day of life, at length arrived. The last and unmistakable summons was a sudden one, and to all but herself startling and unexpected. Her husband was out. A messenger was despatched for him; and, as he entered the apartment, the weeping daughter, who, in kneeling reverence, had been listening to her parting injunctions, rose at a sign from her dying parent, and left the room.

“Robert,” she said, softly addressing her husband, who displayed, and doubtless for the moment felt, much vehemence of grief; and her mild but solemn eyes rested with inexpressible tenderness and sorrow upon the chosen of her youth, the father of her child—“Robert, forbear this bootless grief, and listen as patiently as you can to the last few words I shall ever utter upon earth. I dare not hope they may be im-

mediately successful in inducing you to retrace the sinful and ultimately—be assured—fatal path on which you have so blindly, so recklessly entered; but the day, I trust, will come when they may bear fruit. It matters not to relate *how* I have become acquainted with the mode whereby you acquired your ill-gotten wealth—nay, I beseech you, Robert, interrupt me not; I speak not in anger, but in love. Reproaches cannot, I know, cause one of the bitter hours of the past to be rendered back to you—what is done is done—and too often, I know, the lost and vain regrets that gather behind man in his ephemeral road serve only to throw a dreary light over the past, and afford no help or guidance for the future, for the unborn day which, oh my husband, God *owes* not to you, but which He will, I trust, in mercy grant, to enable you to put away the accursed thing—to restore”——

“ You mistake, Mary! ” groaned Oakley, without uplifting his face from the pillow on which it was bowed and concealed—“ you mistake, Mary; I have done no wrong—none.”

“ Do not attempt to deceive me; do not, I implore you, Robert, strive to deceive yourself by such poor sophistry as may be pleaded in defence of such a crime.” She paused, fainting, and apparently exhausted, but presently resumed. “ Caroline—whose betrothment to her cousin, as we call him, to Harry Neville, has, you will remember, my especial sanction—Caroline has promised that the legacy bequeathed to

her shall be devoted to the wiping away of this offence, so that happily the curse remain not on you—on her. She will, I know, keep her word."

"What madness is this!" exclaimed Oakley, starting to his feet. "You must be"—He paused, rebuked into silence by the solemn, almost stern glance of the dying woman, over whose countenance a startling change at the instant passed.

"And do you not know, Robert—have you not perceived," she said in a faint, tremulous, but deep whisper—"are you now for the first time conscious *that it has killed me?*"

A lamentable cry burst from the heart-stricken man: he clasped his expiring wife passionately in his arms: a promise to comply with her wishes at any sacrifice was on his tongue—would have been uttered, but at the instant the death-sob struggled in her throat, the last gleam of light vanished from her eyes, a faint sigh stirred her pale lips—he knew that she was gone, and the rash vow remained unspoken!

As he left the apartment he met his daughter, embraced her, looked inquiringly in her face, and in that fair tablet read pity, regret, compassion, it may be love for him, vividly traced as before; but esteem, reverence, filial awe, he saw, had vanished for ever. She, too, then knew all! Well, it must be borne.

These sad impressions were soon effaced from the elastic mind of the busy merchant and money-dealer,

or at most served but to hasten his contemplated departure to the wider and more lucrative field of London, where familiar objects, inseparably associated with the past, would no longer incessantly call up memories which he felt were best forgotten. Thomas Hardy, too, whose wishes went for much, was anxious to exchange Bristol for the metropolis; and the result was the transfer of the establishment to the city of London, where Mr. Robert Oakley, counselled, stimulated by his constant shadow, Hardy, plunged eagerly into the distracting whirlpool of the Stock Exchange, rode in apparent triumph amidst its capricious currents and swift eddies, and gathered, it was said, fresh wealth from every ebb and flow of the turbid and dangerous tide.

One afternoon about six months after his removal to London, his old acquaintance, Sir Martin Biddulph, called on him. The greeting of the baronet was jovial and hearty as himself; the response of the money-broker cautious and reserved, as became a rich and prudent man in the presence of a possible borrower.

“ Well, Master Oakley, the world goes swimmingly with you, it appears. You are likely, I am told, to die worth a million ? ”

Robert Oakley only replied to this equivocal felicitation by a cold, fidgety smile and shrug; and his visitor proceeded.

“ But, zounds, man ! what a deucedly harassing life

this money-making must be! Why, you are as thin as a weasel, and look as withered as a last year's apple! There seems scarcely any of you left! You and I must be about the same age—and only just look at me!" The comparison, certainly a striking one, provoked the unbounded mirth of the fox-hunter, but failed to excite any corresponding emotion on the part of his auditor. On the contrary, he seemed considerably annoyed.

"Now, Master Oakley," said the baronet as soon as he had wiped his eyes, overflowing with exuberant mirth, and composed himself to seriousness—"now, Master Oakley, to business; I want your assistance with respect to some money matters."

"I am sorry to say," observed Oakley, with cold civility, "that just now"—

"Cash is scarce—not to be had in fact," interrupted Sir Martin with a renewed guffaw. "Of course it is. I never, for my part, knew it to be otherwise. But my business with you, man alive, is to invest—not borrow!"

"To invest!"

"Positively. As soon as you have recovered breath, listen. Are you ready? Good! Well, then, you know as well as I do, you old usurer—you were a young one, though, when I first knew you—you know that I went the pace for years charmingly; was in fact galloping to the devil as fast as a splendid stud of first-rate racers could carry me; but it appears you do not know

that I have pulled up in time, and that a venerable aunt of mine—excellent old soul!—altered her will a few hours before her death, and, instead of bequeathing her large wealth to half-a-dozen hospitals, bestowed it all on my unworthy self, placing me once more all right with the world, with a splendid balance over. Having had a nearer view than was pleasant of ultimate insolvency and ruin, I determined thenceforth to *keep* myself all right."

"A wise resolve."

"Unquestionably. But, as I have no very great confidence in good intentions when pitted against bad habits, I mean to take myself for a year or two out of the way of temptation. Aunt Martha's Jamaica property has been wretchedly mismanaged, so I intend rusticating amongst the sugar-canies, and thus kill two birds with one barrel."

"I shall be happy to render you my best assistance in any way you can point out," said Oakley with much deference.

"Well, I know you, Oakley, to be a close, and I believe you to be a *safe* man, and that is a great deal to say in these 'suspension-of-cash-payment' times. I wish you first to invest some twenty thousand pounds I have to spare just now in the most profitable securities you know of, and to do the same with such other sums as I may from time to time remit."

Mr. Oakley bowed grateful acquiescence: he would promote Sir Martin's interest to the best of his humble ability.

"I shall shut up Oatlands, and have the principal plate and some boxes of family papers—my will amongst them, by the bye—brought here for security, if you have no objection."

Mr. Oakley could have no possible objection to such an arrangement: none in the world.

"My nephew, Francis Severn—you have seen him, I think? I called with him on you a few years since in Wine-street."

"It was his cousin, was it not?—James Conway—an older person I have understood?"

"Ah, yes; very likely. A sweet youth that, but I hope he will some day mend his manners."

"Wild, I suppose?"

"Yes; besides being ambitious as Lucifer, and as careless too, in my belief, about the means of advancement. I shall provide sufficiently for him. But, as I was about to remark, Frank, who will be my heir—that is, if he does not mortally offend me, which is not very likely; indeed I doubt that he could do so if he tried for very long together—Frank, I say, being about, since the Continent is shut, to make a tour of the United Kingdom, there will be nobody to keep house at Oatlands till I return, so that I am in some sort *obliged* to shut it partially up. And now as to the nature of the securities you would recommend?"

A long business conversation, unnecessary to relate, ensued, at the close of which the baronet, perfectly satisfied with the arrangements suggested by Mr. Oakley, rose to depart.

"By the bye, Oakley, I told you—did I not, long ago?—that your brother holds a farm of mine not far from Oatlands?"

"Not that I remember, Sir Martin; but I know it nevertheless: the families correspond."

"Well, he's a fine gentlemanly fellow let me tell you, and his daughter Alice is a very charming person; very much so indeed. You have seen her, I suppose?"

"No, I have not: my daughter Caroline did a month or two ago."

"Your brother is prospering. I became acquainted with him in consequence of his calling in Berkeley-square many years since with a bill you had cashed for me. You remember, I suppose? Good-day."

"Bad news that for Mr. James Conway," said Thomas Hardy, drawing aside a green calico curtain which had concealed his desk and himself from the view of the baronet.

"You know him, then?" said Oakley.

"Yes; I see him most evenings. We sold stock to the amount of about a thousand pounds for him about four months ago."

"I remember the circumstance, now you mention it."

Hardy re-drew the concealing curtain, and Mr. Oakley resumed his interesting studies on the rise and fall of stocks and consols.

The opinion pronounced by Sir Martin Biddulph

upon the character and position of Mr. Richard Oakley was in no respect an exaggerated one. The teachings of adversity, instead of being thrown away upon him, as they are upon so many thousands of the world, had proved most salutary, both to him and his somewhat volatile, but high-spirited, warm-hearted wife. It had taught them the difference between shadow and substance. They had looked upon the *reverse* side of the glittering shows of pretentious society, and noted not alone the coarse material of which it is essentially composed, but the ignoble motives, shifts, and expedients by which the brilliant figures are abominated and held together; and they determined that their future life should, however humble, be a reality, not a seeming—a positive condition of being, depending for estimation and respectability upon its true nature and quality, neither distorted nor set off by the false lights of vain and ambitious pretence. precepts of wisdom hard to learn, still harder to practise, but of infinite concernment to all who would pass through life unexposed to the contempts, the heartburnings, the painful vicissitudes, which are sure to environ and accompany a false position. Richard Oakley had passed several of the best years of his youth on a farm, and he had a turn, as it is called, for agricultural pursuits. Sir Martin Biddulph happened to have a farm—a small one, of about a hundred acres only—of first-rate land, and he became his tenant. Industry, perseverance, and a

wise economy succeeded with him, as they usually do with everybody; and Mr. Richard Oakley was now in very easy, pleasant circumstances, surrounded by all the material comforts, and by most of the modest luxuries, of life, in a home illumined by the smiles of the cheerfulness of wives, and crowned with a triple halo of gentleness, grace, and beauty, in the person of their daughter Alice. His wife's son, Harry Neville, has chosen a sea-life; and, thanks to Sir Martin Biddulph's interest, had obtained an excellent footing in the maritime service of the East India Company. Richard Oakley knew of the great prosperity of his proud, cold-hearted brother, for both he and his wife corresponded with Mrs. Robert Oakley till within a few days of her decease; and they knew also by the tone of her letters that abundant riches had not added to *her* happiness. More they were not informed of, nor had a right to inquire. Thus with them gently swept along the stream of life—calm, tranquil, and lit up by bright visions of the brilliant destiny awaiting their elegant and beautiful child, as pictured by parental admiration upon the dream-land of the future. Ambitious promptings! but not, so rumour hinted, wholly without colour of excuse; for it was said Sir Martin Biddulph had been influenced by other than the ostensible motives he had assigned in breaking up his establishment at Oatlands, and the peremptory condemnation of his favourite nephew and heir to an exploring ex-

pedition through the fastnesses and wilds of Great Britain and Ireland.

However this may be, Sir Martin, albeit a little flustered by the startling manner in which Mr. Twynham, the family surgeon and apothecary—for, like most country practitioners, he prepared the medicaments he prescribed—spoke of the climate of Jamaica, and its generally fatal effect upon gentlemen of full habit of body, he persisted in his resolution of ascertaining the condition of his West India property with his own eyes. Mr. Twynham, a man of education and considerable ability in his profession, whom an early, imprudent marriage, with its usual accompaniments of numerous children in bibs and pinafores, imperatively forbade to venture on a higher and more speculative range of practice than the neighbourhood of Oatlands afforded, was of course anxious not to lose so important a client as the baronet; and this, Sir Martin comforted himself with reflecting, gave a twist to his opinions upon yellow fever, that deprived them of much of the consideration they would otherwise have been entitled to.

Two years passed away—years of war, of apparently interminable strife and bloodshed, and, as regarded Great Britain, of alternate exultation and dismay; while the nations of the continent, stunned and writhing beneath the drums, tramplings, victories of the great conqueror of the age, as yet saw no hand sufficiently powerful stretched forth to rescue them from the iron

bondage by which they were enthralled: years, necessarily—as indeed the wrinkled brow, restless eye, and thin grey locks of Robert Oakley amply testified—of fearful agitation or rather convulsion on the British Stock Exchange; hot, stifling years, which appeared to have withered up all of healthful life which God had breathed into his nostrils. Still, the infatuated man, though surrounded by the ruins which cumbered that burning heaving soil, toiled on as eagerly as ever at his house of sand—hoping, insensate dreamer! that the unrespecting hurricane would, whoever else suffered wreck, spare him!

Sir Martin Biddulph found that the profitable duty he had undertaken required, for its thorough and lasting completion, a much longer sojourn in Jamaica than he had anticipated; and, although his last letters intimated fears that his health was beginning to give way beneath the deleterious effects of the climate, no definite time as yet seemed fixed upon for his return. His nephew and presumptive heir, Mr. Francis Severn, had, however, contrived to finish *his* appointed task in considerably less time than his uncle had calculated or imagined, and was now returned from his enforced pilgrimage to Oatlands; wonderfully improved, in the opinion of the country-side, not in health only, but in manly comeliness of personal appearance. His old taste for field sports had, it seemed, been rather sharpened than dulled by his long absence from his uncle's well-stocked covers; for he was up and off with his dogs

and gun long before daybreak on the morning after his arrival, or was it, perchance, the sylvan splendour of the scene which awaited him as he emerged from Hopeburn Coppice that had attracted his steps so early abroad? Possibly; for rarely, indeed, is the sombre veil of night uplifted from a view more enchanting in its varied beauty than that which the calm new-risen sun was, as he gazed, tinging with golden light. The solitary house on the brow of the hill, which, beneath the spiritual radiance of the stars, appeared an indistinct mass of pale light and chequered shade, became rapidly defined in outline and in colour: valley, hedgerow, hillside, sent up their winged choristers to heaven; peasants issued from the nestling cottages, of which the smoke was seen curling above the surrounding belt of forest trees; girls whose fresh checks the accustomed morning sun kissed with rude health, drove forth kine to pastures sparkling with dew; and life awoke in valley, hill, and river!

"I doubt," said an active, middle-aged person, who had approached Mr. Severn unperceived—"I doubt, sir, that you have seen anything more truly beautiful in all your two years' wanderings?"

"*More* beautiful!" exclaimed the young man, mechanically, or rather impulsively—"more beautiful"—He checked himself, and, wresting his gaze from the house on the hill, turned half round, and said, colouring slightly as he spoke, "You are early abroad this morning, Mr. Twynham."

"It is many years, Mr. Severn, since I had the choice of my own time of rising: I have been out these two hours, and am now returning home. I was remarking on the singular beauty of the landscape!"

"True—true; very charming indeed: trees, cows, milkmaids, and so forth. Pray, Mr. Twynham," he added hesitatingly, and with a heightened colour, "have you seen our friends of Beech Lodge lately?"

"Which of them?"

"Mr and Mrs. Oakley of course; and—and"—

"Harry Neville? He is second officer on board the *Calcutta*, and will not be home for some months."—

"Truly, but"—

"Or is it, perchance, Deborah the housemaid you are anxious about? because"—

"Pooh! You are in one of your satirical moods this morning, Mr. Twynham; and as I am not in the vein for banter, I must bid you good-by."

"I was never more disposed to be serious—sad, I was about to say, my young friend," said Mr. Twynham, laying his hand upon Mr. Severn's shoulder, and gently detaining him; "for I have been watching with painful interest the absorbed, abstracted gaze you have for some time directed towards Beech Lodge. Absence has not, I fear, sufficed to check, much less subdue, your passion for the beautiful Alice?"

"You *fear*! You, who know Miss Oakley, *fear* that I have not grown indifferent—cold!"—

"You must permit me to speak on this subject with my old freedom, Mr. Severn," replied the surgeon.

"It is a singular, and it may be a fortunate chance (since you, I know, believe that Sir Martin's objections are not insuperable, and so do I) for this young girl—beautiful, amiable, well-educated, as everybody must admit her to be—to have so deeply charmed the heir to so many fertile acres."

"Nothing, one would suppose, should appear more natural," replied Mr. Severn; "unless, indeed, you hold heirship to fertile acres to be necessarily incompatible with correct taste and perfect eyesight."

"And yet I know not," continued Mr. Twynham in a musing tone; "this fortune, gold, power, the idol—by whatever name it may be called—before which the great, as well as little world, bows down so abjectly, is too frequently, I fear, a false-promising god. These unequal marriages, especially," he added with graver emphasis, "seldom bring lasting happiness to either party. A brief season of bewildering enthusiasm; and then, the divine statue which, in the warm light and dawn of love, gave forth entrancing melody, remaining dumb, or yielding but harsh dissonance when swept over by the cold breath of chilled and sated passion, the disenchanted Memnon-idol is too late discovered to be mere ordinary potter's clay, and utterly unworthy the sacrifice made for its possession."

"Upon my word, Mr. Twynham," rejoined Mr. Severn with some heat, "you are extremely classical and eloquent to-day; but, as I am in too cheerful a mood this glorious morning to listen to grave homilies, never prettily composed, perhaps you will have the

goodness to reserve the remainder of your discourse for a sadder and more appropriate hour. *En attendant*, I have the pleasure of wishing you a very good-day."

He hastened off at a pace which speedily brought him within a few yards of the residence of the Oakleys, where he paused, disappointed and out of breath. Half-way up the hill he had doffed his hat, in delighted recognition of the beautiful Alice, whose silken tresses, waving with golden light, gleamed, unless his eyes deceived him, from amidst the green foliage which enframed the windows of the sitting-room. His eyes *had* deceived him; the golden tresses were but sun-rays reflected from the polished glass and glittering leaves. Alice must be aware, he thought, of his return, and might have known he would be early past her dwelling. Was it forgetfulness, caprice, change, that withheld her from appearing? He walked many times round the house, and at length, his patience thoroughly exhausted, and, moreover, considerably ruffled in temper, whistled his dogs together, and was turning to depart, when his quick ear caught the lifting of a sash, and a low, sweet voice exclaimed in the prettiest accent of surprise imaginable, "So early abroad, Mr. Severn!" He was in an instant beneath the casement, but, the lady being summoned from within, the colloquy was necessarily a brief one; yet eloquent withal, if one might judge by the bright blush which lit up the fair girl's charming countenance, and which was *not* caused by the bouquet of fresh roses held fan-

wise in her hand; for it retained its crimson radiance long after the flowers—too loosely held, it seemed—had fallen from her hand, and been caught and placed with graceful gallantry in Mr. Severn's bosom. He slowly withdrew, and lingeringly pursued his path in search of sport, or what at least should have been sport, but which this morning, at all events, seemed to prove anything but pleasant pastime. He missed every shot, to the great surprise and scandal of his dogs, which made no allowance for the disturbing influences of a heightened pulse and preoccupied brain. So unsuccessful and so uninteresting was the pursuit, that Mr. Severn has just decided on returning to Oatlands, calling in of course at Beech Lodge as he passed—perhaps breakfasting there, as he used formerly sometimes to do—when his sportsman propensities were stimulated into momentary activity by the sight of a splendid covey flying past, far out of reach of shot, and settling down in an adjoining field. Hastily, carelessly, he broke through the intervening hedge, dragging his gun by the end of the barrel after him, when some obstruction, a twig probably, caught one of the triggers, and the charge of a barrel was lodged in his shoulder, inflicting a frightful wound. He was conveyed to Oatlands by some labourers who had witnessed the accident; and, fever supervening after the operation of extracting the shot, he lay for many days in great danger, though unconscious of it, as well as of that which, known would have done much to as-

suage the pain and grief of the wound—so inconsistent is the selfishness of love—the distraction and agony of mind evinced by Alice Oakley when she heard of the, to her represented, *fatal* accident that had befallen him; revealing a state of mind which maidenly reserve had hitherto concealed, or at least left him in some doubt of. It was, however, reported to him, though imperfectly, on his partial recovery, and had the effect of bringing about an immediate *éclaircissement* with Alice and her parents; the issue of which was, that Mr. Severn was accepted as the future husband of Alice, subject to the approval of Sir Martin Biddulph; to whom his nephew immediately wrote, depicting in glowing colours the fervour and invincibility of his passion, and the innumerable perfections of the object of it, and imploring the baronet's consent to a union on which, the young gentleman declared, not only his peace, but his very life depended. This done, the lovers awaited in apprehensive hope, and with the best patience they could exercise, a reply involving, according to their opinion and feelings, such tremendous issues.

With the same mail went out a letter to the baronet from Mr. Twynham the surgeon. This gentleman, either really apprehensive of a fatal result in Mr. Severn's weak state, should an adverse reply be returned, or, which seems most likely, influenced by a desire to serve his old friends the Oakleys, quite as much as by regard for the heir of Oatlands, impressed

upon Sir Martin the necessity of according a favourable response to his nephew's prayer; otherwise, Mr. Twynham seriously declared, he anticipated the worst results. The anxiety felt by Mr. Severn certainly materially retarded his recovery, for the four months which intervened between the despatch of his letter and the baronet's reply had failed of restoring him to his former health and vigour. "Hey-day!" exclaimed Mr. Twynham as he called at Oatlands one afternoon on his customary visit, and found Mr. Severn earnestly engaged in the perusal of freshly-arrived letters and papers—"Hey-day, Mr. Severn—the medicines that have lighted up those but yesterday pale cheeks and doubting eyes with health and hope never came from my laboratory, I'll be sworn. You have news, I am sure, from Sir Martin?"

"My dear Twynham," exclaimed Mr. Severn, gaily jumping up from his chair, and heartily shaking the surgeon's hand, "you are the best fellow in the world. Here is a letter from my dear excellent uncle, fully consenting to my union with Alice, chiefly moved thereto, he says with his usual amiable jocularity, by the same motive that induced Beatrice to wed Benedict—'upon great compulsion, and partly to save my life, as he had heard—and from better authority than my own—that I was likely to die of a consumption.'" The congratulatory mirth of the two gentlemen upon the success of their conspiracy was unbounded, especially as Sir Martin gave *carte blanche* as to the time

the nuptials must take place, hinting that he should not be displeased if an early mail brought him news of the marriage. Somewhat private and unostentatious it should be, Sir Martin added, as the festivities could be adjourned till his arrival, which he hoped would not be long delayed.

“One would not needlessly sadden the joy of the young people by the expression of sinister forebodings!” mentally exclaimed the surgeon as he left Oatlands on his return home; “but I am greatly mistaken if the kind, generous-hearted baronet does not feel a strong misgiving that his days are numbered, and is therefore anxious that the wedding should take place before intelligence of his death arrived to forbid its celebration for a long time to come. A better, more gentle-minded man than Sir Martin never, I think, breathed.”

Bowed, haggard, panic-stricken, utterly unable longer to conceal—practised as he had become in dissimulation—the frightful emotion which convulsed him, Mr. Robert Oakley hastened about noon, on a bright day of sunshine in the ensuing spring, from the distracting Babel of the Stock Exchange to the silence and concealment of his counting-house. “Ruin—ruin!” he frantically muttered as he strode wildly up and down the room; “blank, utter, irretrievable ruin! Fortune, character—all—all gone! Fool—idiot, that I have been, to spend my strength for that which is

not bread ! to have schemed, toiled, fretted an anxious life away only to reap in premature old age dust and bitter ashes—scorn, contempt, contumely, destitution. Well ! ” he almost screamed, pausing in his disordered walk as the door opened and admitted the person of Thomas Hardy, whose bloated countenance wore a half-dismayed, half-insolent look—“ well ! Is there any hope that this dreadful panic will abate ? Speak, will you ? What do men say now ? ”

“ That consols will be at least two per cent. lower by settling-day, from which only forty-eight hours now divide us. You and I know what that means in the present very delightful state of the affairs of this house.”

“ It means destruction—ruin—shame ! My daughter’s fortune, besides large sums belonging to Sir Martin Biddulph, all gone—lost—swallowed up in the infernal vortex ! Devil ! ” he shouted, turning with sudden fierceness upon his associate—“ devil ! to what an accursed pass have your plans and machinations brought me ! ”

“ *My* plans and machinations ! ” replied Hardy with brutal, defying insolence. “ Did you suppose for a moment that *all* speculations would prove as *certainly* profitable as that of the *Three Sisters* ? ”

“ Taunting villain ! ” exclaimed Oakley, literally foaming with impotent rage, “ is this a time to insult —to trample on me ? ”

“ Well, perhaps not. But come, old fellow, it’s of

no use snivelling. Something must be *done*, and quickly too, or the ship will be on the breakers; and, as I'm a passenger, I'd rather not."

"What can be done that has not already been attempted? What expedient, what device, can you suggest that has not been tried and failed—miserably failed?"

"Much can still be done, I tell you, if you are the same man you were on the day you met the pilot in the Isle of Wight."

"Would I were—would I were! It was then I lost myself: then began the swift descent at the end of which lies ruin. But regrets will not recall the past: as she said, those fatal hours cannot be rendered back to us."

"True enough—but the present at least is our own; and on it, if you have not become a mere drivelling dotard, a splendid future may be built up, for all that's come and gone yet; and luckily here comes a gentleman very heartily disposed, or I am much mistaken, to aid in the good work."

As he spoke, Mr. James Conway entered; and Hardy, who had evidently expected him, instantly rose, and locked the door of the counting-house.

The new-comer was scarcely more than thirty years of age, but long, habitual indulgence in evil courses had already dried up the fresh springs of life, and smitten his still youthful frame with incipient weakness and decay. A mournful wreck he seemed, with

just sufficient traces left of what he had been to measure the depth and extent of his fall and degradation. He appeared to be greatly excited, and both voice and manner indicated extreme and painful emotion.

"Well, Hardy," he said, as soon as he had taken a seat, "have you spoken to Mr. Oakley of our proposition?"

"No. I thought it would come with more effect from you."

"What have you to say, young man?" demanded Oakley. "What is your business here?"

"To serve you, because only by doing so I can effectually serve myself. You perceive I am candour itself."

"It appears so. Go on."

"You will not be surprised to hear that, through my intimacy with Hardy, I am thoroughly acquainted with the present disastrous state of your affairs—that I know you are, in fact, on the brink of utter ruin."

"Plunged in—overwhelmed, no hope, no friendly plank to grasp at!" moaned his unfortunate auditor, wringing his withered hands; "blank, total, irredeemable ruin!"

"That your daughter Caroline's fortune," continued Conway, as if exulting in the anguish of the wound which he was probing to the quick, "has been spent without her knowledge; and that, should the present downward tendency of the funds continue till settling-

day, now only forty-eight hours distant, the differences on your enormous time-bargains will sweep away every shilling you possess, leaving you a defaulter to Sir Martin Biddulph to the tune of between twenty and thirty thousand pounds—a clear breach of trust, to say nothing of other but less pressing obligations."

"True—true! Would I were in my grave!"

"So would not I, at least for the present; but now to real business. I can save you!"

"You?"

"I. In the first place, I have to inform you that my uncle, Sir Martin Biddulph, is dead. The news has just arrived."

"Dead! Are you positive?"

"Quite. The fever carried him off at Port Royal a few days before his intended embarkation; and, moreover, my amiable cousin, his heir, according to the will left in your custody, has arrived in Berkeley-square with his recently-wedded bride."

"You astound me. I had not heard that he was about to marry. Who is the lady?"

"I do not know: a mere nobody, I believe, but a very charming person notwithstanding. I had heard nothing about the marriage which he intimated, but I doubt whether it had my uncle's full approbation—till this morning, when he sent for me to acquaint me with Sir Martin's decease. The lucky heir is a sharp hand you will find. I happened to mention that I was coming here, and he bade me say that he should call

upon you to-morrow—of course to arrange and settle his ‘little account.’ ”

“ It needed but this ! ” groaned Oakley, pallid with fear, and shaking with uncontrollable terror—“ it needed but this ! ”

“ Now to the point : I am, as you must be aware, according to the English law of succession, Sir Martin’s heir ; but my rightful claim is barred, superseded, by the will in your possession ”——

“ Ha ! ”

“ Hardy and I talked this matter quietly over ; and here, in a word, are my terms. They are, I think, liberal, considering that the transaction involves, as you will see, no possible risk. Burn that will in my presence, and I not only forgive the debt to the estate, but will assure you a sum sufficient to enable you to surmount all your difficulties ! ”

Oakley started to his feet, as if bitten by a serpent, and glared with breathless excitement at the tempter. “ How—how,” he at length gasped—“ how dare you propose robbery—felony—to—to me ? ”——

“ Stuff, man ! Is it a greater robbery to restore his inheritance to a rightful heir, than to make such charming bargains as gentlemen who stand much better upon ‘Change than you will do in a day or two, frequently effect by the aid of carrier-pigeons and other ingenious devices ? —more of a felony than that of the *Three Sisters* ? Come, come ; this is indeed the Devil turned precisian ! ”

Robert Oakley sat down without speaking, and, leaning his face, covered with his hands, on a desk, effectually concealed the workings of his countenance.

"Miss Caroline Oakley's future husband," continued Conway; "Mr. Neville—some sort of relative of yours, is he not?"

"Yes," said Hardy, answering for his principal; "a kind of nephew-in-law."

"Well, he has arrived in England: I met him in Berkeley-square. It is probable his ship touched at Jamaica, and that he brought some intelligence concerning Sir Martin. I overheard him say, in reply to an invitation to dinner, that he was going to Hampstead this evening. He, too, as your daughter is just of age, will doubtless be for contracting marriage at once, and will thus acquire a right to put awkward questions concerning a certain vanished legacy. Really you will have your hands full unless you at once close with me."

"The will," said Oakley, partially looking up, and speaking in a low, shaking voice—"the will is at Hampstead with my private papers. I took it there to—to look at it."

"Ha! then this charming scheme of mine, or one something like it, is not altogether unfamiliar to that plotting brain?"

"No—no; you mistake: curiosity merely—nothing else. You had better be there—you and Hardy—about eight o'clock. Neville will be gone; or, if not, it will be of no great consequence."

"Bravo!—this is something like! We will be punctual, depend upon it. Come, Hardy, a bottle or two of wine to the success of the rightful heir will not be amiss just now. Good-day, Mr. Oakley. 'Facilis descensus Averni,' " he muttered with a triumphant sneer as he gained the street; "or, as our fighting neighbours better express it, 'Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coute.' I thought his facile virtue would not prove obstinately squeamish."

The excitement produced by the day's events, and especially by the foregoing conversation, and the villainous conclusion to which it pointed, had such an effect on the appearance of Mr. Oakley, that, on his arrival at his suburban domicile at Hampstead, his daughter, who seemed unusually light of heart, apprehended that he was seriously ill, and suggested that medical advice should be immediately summoned.

"No, Cary, no: a little excited by the panic in the money-market, which will not, however, much affect me; so you need not look so alarmed—that's all. I shall soon be better. Neville, I hear, has arrived. Have you seen him?"

"No, papa; but I have just received a note from him stating that he will be detained in London rather late, and will not, consequently, be here quite so early as he expected. He adds," continued the graceful and amiable girl with a brilliant blush, "that he has not only an important favour to ask, but great and pleasing news to communicate."

The father sighed, and, observing that he had dined in the city, ordered wine and some dessert to be taken into his private room, and a fire to be lighted. He soon afterwards retired there.

At the hour appointed, Mr. James Conway, accompanied by Hardy, arrived. They found Mr. Oakley literally surrounded by papers, which he appeared to have commenced sorting. Conway glanced sharply round, but no parchment or paper resembling a will met his view.

Mr. Oakley, as it was growing dark, ordered candles to be brought in; and this done, and his visitors helped to a glass of wine, of which it was quite evident he had himself been drinking freely, for the purpose, doubtless, of sustaining his fainting courage, conversation in a subdued tone forthwith commenced.

“I find,” said Oakley, “that the exact sum in which I am indebted to Sir Martin Biddulph’s estate is twenty-four thousand seven hundred pounds. Should a further decline of but one per cent. take place in consols before settling-day, and you know it is anticipated that the fall will be even greater than that, the differences I shall be called upon to pay will amount to about the same sum, a little more perhaps. These immediately pressing demands provided for, I may, I think, recover.”

“A thumping sum, upon my word!” observed Conway.

“A mere trifle when weighed against estates said to be worth upwards of fifteen thousand a year, besides

immense personals in family plate, furniture, jewels, and funded cash."

"Well, well; I am not disposed to be churlish. Anything else?"

"There is Caroline's fortune, which I shall require some assistance to repay; the understanding of course is that you are to help me completely through my difficulties; partial, insufficient help would merely defer the evil day."

"I promised to do so certainly; though the price to be paid for such an easy, safe piece of service appears an enormous one. However, my word is my bond; and now, where is the will?"

"Here," replied Oakley, taking it out of the table-drawer nearest him. Conway's eyes flashed triumphantly, and he made a motion as if to snatch the precious document out of Oakley's trembling hands.

"Stay—stay!" cried the stockbroker, starting back; "I must have security first that you will perform your engagement."

"Security," echoed Conway, gazing with bewildered surprise first at Oakley and then at Hardy. "What does he mean?"

"That you must put our agreement in writing," said Oakley with a cunning, maudlin leer.

"Oh, is that all? Hand me a pen, and I will do it instantly."

He scribbled out an undertaking to the effect agreed upon, and handed it to Oakley.

"That will do then?"

"Yes; and yet I am still really trusting to your honour; this agreement could not be legally enforced, could not even be produced."

"Perhaps not; still it would give you the means of exposing me, and you do not suppose I should be idiot enough to provoke you to do that?"

"True, you would not, certainly. Here it is then."

Conway seized the will with eager triumph, glanced rapidly over it, to make sure that he was not duped, thrust it with furious glee into the fire, and pressed his boot upon it, as if crushing some living, detested enemy, till it was thoroughly consumed. "Hurra!" he shouted, carried away by excitement. "Now, Cousin Francis, I have you on the hip!"

"Hush! hush! for Heaven's sake, or the servants will hear you," exclaimed Oakley, who had looked on at the consummation of the crime in pallid terror.

After arranging with Oakley for the next day's course of action, Conway and his associate took their leave, and the trembling conspirator was alone with his pale fears. He gazed, after a while, with a kind of simpering satisfaction at the document Conway had drawn up and signed, and was folding it up, when the voice of an itinerant vender of news loudly announcing a second edition of the "Courier" "with full and authentic particulars of a great victory obtained by the most noble the Marquis of Wellington over the French armies in Spain," struck his ear. He sprang up in wild surprise to purchase the journal containing intelligence so certain to send up the funds, the only

effect in regard to which the national triumphs had for years appeared joyful or glorious to him ; and, in so doing, he heedlessly overturned one of the candles amongst his papers, and, without noticing what he had done, rushed out of the apartment, closing the door behind him. He speedily procured the newspaper, and turned to regain his room, when, the fresh air, taking effect upon the large and altogether unusual quantity of wine he had taken, caused him to turn giddy, sick, and he would have fallen had he not leaned against the wall of the passage for support. Partially recovering for a moment, and conscious that bed, under such circumstances, was the best place for him, he groped his way up stairs, reached his chamber, and, the instant he entered it, fell prostrate on the floor in a state of insensibility.

About a quarter of an hour had elapsed when Caroline Oakley, who was sitting alone in the little front drawing-room, awaiting with some impatience the delayed arrival of her affianced husband, was suddenly startled by a cry of "Fire! fire!" from the servants below, who, the kitchen being at the back of the house, had not, it afterwards appeared, become aware of the conflagration till all chance of arresting its progress was out of the question. "Fire! fire!" Miss Oakley sprang up, ran to the door, and to her infinite terror found that the lower rooms were in a blaze of flame, which already flew in forked tongues across the staircase leading to the landing where she

stood. The papers strewed on the table and about the floor of Mr. Oakley's private room had been ignited by the candle he had heedlessly overturned, and, as the apartment was full of other easily-combustible material, and the oak panelling which separated it from the passage was as dry as tinder, the fire had spread with almost inconceivable rapidity. Miss Oakley had on a light muslin frock, and to attempt to pass, or even approach the flames in such a dress, would be, she felt, instant destruction. She hastened in wild terror up stairs to her bedroom, and, with fingers that almost refused their office, attempted to substitute a thick cloth pelisse for the light clothing she unfortunately had on. Time seemed to fly with bewildering rapidity; while the shouts and cries outside the house, and the crackling and glare of the flames within, increased in violence and intensity with every passing moment: presently a thick stifling smoke rapidly filled the chamber, impeding still more her trembling efforts; and when at last she had accomplished the change of dress, and groped her way to the door, she found it locked! Distraction! It flashed across her that on entering she had closed and locked the door, as if to exclude some pursuing, living enemy—but the key, where could she have placed *that*? She eagerly groped on the bed, the dressing-table, the drawers—nowhere could she find it. She felt that her senses were rapidly leaving her, when a well-known voice calling wildly upon her name caught

her ear. She uttered a piercing scream, and again attempted to reach the door. To burst in the frail lock, to seize her in his arms, wrap her securely in the thick counterpane he tore off the bed, and bear her swiftly down the flaming stairs, was, for the athletic young seaman who had so opportunely arrived, scarcely more than the work of a minute.

Once in the open air, her fainting spirits rallied; and, after one glance of infinite gratitude and tenderness towards her deliverer, she looked eagerly round, and exclaimed, "My father—where is he?" No one had seen him. The servants, who had got out of the house by the back way uninjured, said that, as they knew he had been in the room where the fire broke out, they thought he must have escaped the first. "No—no—no!" exclaimed Miss Oakley; "I heard him ascend the stairs more than a quarter of an hour since, and go into his bedroom. Oh, Harry!" she continued with passionate intreaty, "save him! save my father from so dreadful—so horrible a death!" A warm pressure of the hand answered her, and Neville was starting forward to fulfil her behest, when a fireman grasped his arm and held him back.

"Twould be madness, young man. The old-fashioned, panelled-built house is burning like a match. In another minute the lower stairs will fall in, and the roof soon afterwards. Do not needlessly throw away your life."

Neville paused: the building was thoroughly enve-

loped in flames, which were bursting through every window, both front and back. At the instant a wild, despairing cry, a shriek of intense and desperate agony, arose from out the blazing house. The intrepid seaman needed no further urging. He shook off the fireman's friendly grasp, drew his hat down to protect his eyes as much as possible, and the next instant disappeared within the flaming pile amidst the shouts of the admiring spectators. Fighting desperately with the fire, scorched, bruised, blackened, he at length gained the upper landing place, and, guided by the cries of the terrified man, soon had him in his arms—his attenuated frame was scarcely so heavy as Caroline's—and was again descending the stairs. In vain! The vehement flame beat him back. A moment, and the lower stair fell in, and he could scarcely save himself by springing back and catching at the upper banisters. What was to be done? There was still a chance for himself, by dropping down whilst the sudden falling of the stair momentarily stifled the flames; but the poor moaning wretch in his arms!—could he abandon him? He remembered there was a window looking out of the sloping roof. He swiftly gained it, and a loud shout from the people below greeted his appearance at the aperture. "A ladder!" he exclaimed; "there is a chance yet if you only bear a hand." Twenty persons started off in quest of ladders, and Neville drew himself and his burden as quickly as possible through the narrow casement. The tiled roof was so sharply sloped that it was impossible to stand

or walk upon it, and he stretched himself down on his back, with his feet reaching to the eaves, still holding the terrified and helpless man in his arms. The heat of the tiles singed his clothes, and he felt that his chance of life was rapidly becoming desperate. At length a ladder was brought, and raised against the house.

"Just under the edge of the roof," cried the young man; "I must slide through that flame."

"Ay, ay," was the prompt response.

Neville felt for the ends of the ladder with his feet. "All right! Now hold firm at the foot. Cling close to me, Mr. Oakley," he added, "and bury your face as much as possible in my waistcoat. I must have both my arms at liberty. Now then!" With a powerful effort he pushed himself, as it were, over the edge of the roof, slid, as only sailors can, swiftly down the ladder, and safely reached the ground. The hurras of the spectators mingled with the crash of the falling roof. The delay of another minute must have been inevitably fatal.

Mr. Robert Oakley awoke late the next day with a strange sensation of pain and weakness, confusion of mind as well as illness of body; whilst mingling with, and dominating all, was a dull, aching sense of having lent himself to the commission of a dreadful offence, upon which, during the age of terror he had passed when environed by what appeared impassable walls of fire, he had thought the All-seeing God had passed and executed immediate judgment. That brave

young man, too, who had rescued him from the devouring flame at the imminent hazard of his own life—Caroline's future husband—a union sanctioned, blessed by the dying prayers of an angel now in heaven—he also would be robbed— No, that money, he remembered, was to be devoted to—to—no matter; he was strangely confused this morning; besides, had not Conway promised— Ah! but would he keep his promise, now that— The current of his darkening thoughts was checked by the entrance of his daughter. She looked charmingly; unusual gaiety danced in her eyes, and her step appeared to have all at once recovered the elastic buoyancy of her young days before her mother was withdrawn from her. “A letter for you, papa. It was sent to the city; but, as it was marked ‘immediate’ and ‘very important,’ Danby thought it better to send it here.” Mr. Oakley and his daughter, I should have stated, had obtained temporary lodgings the previous evening in the Hampstead neighbourhood.

“‘ Immediate’ and ‘very important,’ ” said Oakley; “ who can it be from, I wonder? ”

“ Here are your spectacles: read it; and when you have done, I have such joyful tidings for you.”

“ Joyful tidings for *me!* ” exclaimed the conscience-burdened man with sad emphasis.

“ For you—for me—for all of us! You have often heard me speak of my Cousin Alice, beautiful Alice, dear Harry’s sister? ”

"Yes, very often: but what of her?"

"Only that she is—— But first read your letter."

"Do you read it for me, Caroline; my eyes seem dim, and I feel confused here." He touched his forehead with his hand.

"You have not yet recovered from the terror of last night, papa. Harry, who brought me the good news this morning, is not well either: he is a good deal scorched and bruised."

"Brave, excellent young man! But read, Cary, read."

"How odd!" she exclaimed the instant she had broken the seal. "From the very person I was at the moment thinking of. It is dated from Berkeley-square, and states that Mr. Severn desires you to call there at four o'clock to-day, and bring Sir Martin Biddulph's will with you, as he has had a strange visit from a Mr. Conrad—no; Con—Con—I cannot well make out the name."

"Conway!" suggested her father with a suppressed groan.

"Yes, Conway, who is to call again at that hour. You will go of course, papa?"

"Yes; it is essential that I should."

"Then you had better get up at once: I shall go with you."

"You go with me! What in Heaven's name for?"

"You will know, dear papa, when you get there," said the joyous girl, kissing his forehead, and trip-

ping lightly away. She stopped with the half-opened door in her hand, and, looking back, said with merry archness, " You know, I daresay, that Mr. Severn is married ; but you don't know who the Lady of Oatlands is—not yet, but you shall presently, if you are a good boy." She vanished, and her gay laugh rang jocundly along the passage, as she hurried off to order a coach, and prepare herself for the ride to Berkeley-square.

"Lady of Oatlands!" murmured Oakley, as he got out of bed. "What can she mean? Some foolish jest, I suppose. Dear me, I seem strangely giddy and bewildered. The fire—the fire, no doubt ; and, now I think of it, what so natural as that the will should have been burned with other papers and documents then to be sure ; and yet," he added with a confused look, and mechanically rubbing his forehead, "that is not, I think, what we agreed to say. Let me see. Lady of Oatlands!" he continued, wandering again. "She was speaking just before of Neville's sister, my brother Richard's child, Alice : surely she could not mean—No—no ; that—that would be too deep damnation !" He shook like an aspen at the thought that had arisen in his mind, and caught wildly at the bedpost for support. With difficulty he dismissed the idea as improbable and absurd ; and, hurrying his preparations, by the time Caroline returned had finished his toilet, and was ready to set out.

"Now then, papa, the coach is at the door. Must

we go to the city for the will? It is full late already."

"No, dear—no; I will explain. There is no occasion to go to the city."

Both were so entirely absorbed by the quick thoughts which glanced in swift succession through their minds—his, indistinct, gloomy, terrible, as Night and Fear; hers, light and joyous as flowers waving in the fragrant breath of golden summer—that no word was spoken by either till they arrived in Berkeley-square.

"Here we are, papa!" exclaimed Miss Oakley, arousing her father from his dull reverie.

He slowly descended from the coach, dismissed it, and, leaning heavily on his daughter's arm, entered the magnificent mansion, and was immediately ushered up stairs into the drawing-room.

The company, which rose at their entrance, were, when the servant announced their names, in a state of great, and it seemed painful excitement. The youthful bride, Mrs. Severn, was seated between her husband and mother, who each held one of her hands. Her sweet face was flushed and tearful; and an expression of angry surprise, not unmixed with alarm, was visible not only upon Mr. Severn's countenance, but on that of Mrs. Richard Oakley, whose husband was engaged in earnest, and, as it seemed, agitating conversation with Mr. Neville. At a little distance sat Mr. Conway, in an ostentatiously-defiant attitude, and

with an insolent expression of face ; but beneath which a person accustomed to note the exterior signs of human emotion could not have failed to detect hot and cold flushes of undefined apprehension flitting to and fro. Hardy, by whom he was accompanied, stood a little behind him, his sinister features wearing their usual callous, God-and-man-defying aspect.

But all this Caroline Oakley heeded not, neither did her father. She only saw her beautiful Cousin Alice ; it was more than two years since they had last met, and she speeded with eager fondness to embrace, to congratulate, to lavish on her the joyous tokens of her affectionate, loving admiration and delight. As for Robert Oakley, he saw at first but a mass of faces, menacing, stern at least, he thought, except, indeed, that of his brother—his brother so coldly thrown off, contemned, abandoned, many years before, but who now stepped forward and shook him warmly by the hand as he guided his tottering steps to a chair. What could it all mean ? His agitation, his bewilderment, was pitiable. He rose from his chair, and seemed about to cross over to Mr. Conway, then sat down again, got up, reseated himself in the blankest confusion and dismay.

“Calm yourself, Mr. Oakley,” said Mr. Severn. “This matter will, I have no doubt, be speedily cleared up. You of course received my note.”

“He did,” replied Caroline Oakley, who, puzzled and dismayed by the strange aspect of the circle of faces

round her, except, indeed, that of Neville, had rejoined her father. "We are here in compliance with the request it contained."

"That being so," continued Mr. Severn with relaxed sternness, "this strange misapprehension can be at once terminated. The will, sir, which my uncle, Sir Martin Biddulph, left in your custody, and of which I have long known the purport, you of course have brought with you?"

"The will!" murmured Robert Oakley, gazing with a perplexed and terrified expression at the speaker—"the will!"

"Yes, sir; I speak plainly I think. The will of Sir Martin Biddulph, left, as he informed me, with you."

"Ah, yes, I remember," rejoined the bewildered man, rubbing his forehead, as if to recall some circumstance to memory, and looking fixedly at Mr. Conway, who appeared purposely to avoid his gaze. "The will—it was burned last night in the dreadful fire!"

"Burned!" cried Mr. Severn—"burned! Why, this is a new invention! You said just now, Mr. Conway, and the person near you confirmed your words, that Mr. Oakley declared no will of Sir Martin's had ever been left with him."

"Precisely; but his intellect seems deranged."

"Not left with me," exclaimed Oakley, as if suddenly recalling what to that moment had escaped his memory. True—true—not left with me; true, I remember now, that was it."

"Father! father!" exclaimed Caroline, throwing herself on her knees before him in an ecstasy of agonized apprehension, "what dreadful meaning lies concealed in your words?"

"Nothing, my child," he answered, gently raising her. "Not left with me—no, no—burned, as I told you: how could I help it?"

Exclamations of surprise, rage, and indignation, burst from the lips of his brother and Mr. Severn.

"Stay, stay, do not curse me, sir; do not upbraid me, Richard: I will make all right. That girl, that lady, is she your child?"

"Yes, and the wife of the man you have carelessly or wilfully beggared."

"And did I not hear some one say, as we came along, that the funds had risen three per cent. this morning?"

"They had at two o'clock at all events," said Hardy, soothingly.

"Good; and that lady is your daughter? So, Mr. Conway, I shall not want your assistance, and everything will be right again—quite right." He laughed faintly, and stood up, gazing with a vacant, elated expression upon his auditors. Their stern and indignant looks appeared to recall his wandering mind to a sense of the reality of the scene before him. His filmy eyes lightened with momentary intelligence; he burst into a paroxysm of tears, and threw himself into the arms of his brother, exclaiming, in the last coherent words

he ever uttered, “ Forgive me, brother ; oh forgive me. I helped to burn the will last night ! He, Conway, paid the price of my soul ; and I, miserable villain that I am, who killed my wife, have now ruined you, yours, Caroline—all that ever loved or trusted me.” Violent convulsions seized him, and he was borne out of the apartment, followed by his weeping, horror-stricken daughter.

“ You hear ? ” said Mr. Severn, addressing Conway.

“ I have heard,” replied that person, quickly recovering his momently-faltering hardihood—“ I have heard the ravings of a lunatic. You heard him declare a minute before that no will had been left with him. That, no doubt, is the fact.”

“ It is all raving nonsense what he says about burning a will last night,” said Hardy with cool effrontery ; “ that I can testify.”

“ Scoundrel ! ” exclaimed Mr. Severn, pale with passion.

“ Never mind, Hardy,” said Conway with triumphant malice ; “ losers, you know, are privileged to call names. But it is time this business should be terminated. Either, my sweet, amiable, *virtuous* coz, produce the will you speak of, or, like a sensible fellow, give possession at once to the undoubted heir-at-law. I still adhere to my promise of allowing you a handsome annuity for life—on condition, of course, that my unquestionable right is at once and frankly admitted.”

“ I will accept no gift from you,” replied Mr.

Severn ; “and I will assuredly surrender nothing till I have consulted Sir Martin’s solicitor, whom I momently expect.”

“ Quite right, coz,” rejoined Conway ; “and if that astute gentleman—Mr. Smart, I believe ; firm of Smart and Figes—does not long delay his appearance, I can have no objection to your remaining here till he comes ”——

This insolent speech, and the angry retort rising to Mr. Severn’s lips, were both checked by the footman’s announcement of “ Mr. Smart.”

A very properly-named gentleman indeed ; and, moreover, spruce, neat, spotless, as if he had just stepped—powdered hair, pigtail, polished Hessian boots, bottle-green coat, light-flowered waistcoat, gold snuff-box, and all—out of a show-glass. One, too, of the most polite, the most courteous of gentlemen ; bland as summer in speech ; in action, it was reported, keen as the north wind ; a bachelor withal, although a great admirer of the gentler sex, for whom he invariably manifested unbounded respect and deference. He glided courteously round the circle, tendering his compliments or his snuff-box alternately to all ; which done, he had leisure to gaze round in astounded recognition of the perplexed and angry countenances by which he found himself environed.

“ Very extraordinary, upon my word ! Quite, it should seem, ‘ à la mort.’ Sir Martin was unquestionably a most estimable gentleman, and of course it is

proper and natural his death should excite grief—natural and proper grief, that is; for I hold excess, even of virtuous emotions, to be unchristian, and therefore"—

"It is not *that*," interrupted Mr. Severn impatiently, although he still hesitated to ask the question which trembled on his lips.

"Not that! Then what, in the name of fortune, *can* it be? Something excessively melancholy and grievous I should say," added the solicitor, helping himself to a comfortable pinch, and bowing with elaborate courtesy to Mrs. Severn, "to throw a gloom over the features of *your* husband—excuse my freedom of speech, madam, pray; it was quite involuntary—spontaneous, I assure you—and the possessor of sixteen thousand a-year. Very melancholy and grievous indeed; quite a curiosity, I should say, and I am extremely anxious to make its acquaintance. I think I perceive," continued the oily man of law, finding no one reply to him—"I think I perceive the cause of this passing cloud. Don't you think, sir," he added, approaching Mr. Conway with his extended snuff-box, and speaking in the blandest tone imaginable—"don't you think, sir, that all matters relative to the annuity bequeathed you by Sir Martin's will would be better, more pleasantly, arranged at my office?"

Mr. Conway smiled, and immediately said, "You know, Mr. Smart—none better, I am sure—the position and rights of an heir-at law?"

“Unquestionably I do. He succeeds to the real estate, and so much of exclusive personals, though there are conflicting decisions, as pertain to the proper maintenance of his condition. The family plate and furniture of Oatlands, and this mansion, for instance, would, in my opinion, pass to you with the realty, as the late Sir Martin Biddulph’s heir-at-law, were you not—as we all know you are—and really were it not that the fortunate legatee is my excellent and esteemed young friend—if he will permit me to call him so—Mr. Severn, I should greatly regret the circumstance — barred from the succession by the amiable baronet’s will.”

“Have you the original draft of that will?” said Mr. Severn.

“Original draft! No, certainly not. Of what possible use would it be?”

“I thought perhaps, helped with your testimony, it might avail; but, as it is, we are, it seems, beggars!”

“Eh! what!” exclaimed Mr. Smart, springing briskly up from the chair in which he had just seated himself. “Eh! what!”

“The will is destroyed—burned!” said Mr. Severn bitterly.

“What! eh!” again ejaculated the lawyer, wheeling half round, and facing Mr. Severn.

“The late Sir Martin Biddulph left no will,” said Mr. Conway from the opposite side; and Mr. Smart

wheeled back again, once more repeating, “What! eh!”

No one seemed disposed to further enlighten him, and he was compelled himself to renew the conversation. “Upon my life this is very extraordinary. Will you, sir—will your ladyship—I beg pardon, I am wrong—premature, at all events. The baronetcy is, I am aware, extinct, in consequence of the failure of heirs in the male line; but it will be renewed, madam, no question of that, looking at the steady support given to the minister by the late excellent baronet. Still I am premature; but will you, madam, prevail on some of these gentlemen to explain?”

“The explanation is as easy as it is conclusive,” said Mr. Severn, and he related what had previously occurred.

“Remarkable, madam, is it not?” said Mr. Smart when the narration was finished. “Quite a drama in itself—quite so.” Harry Neville’s keen eye noticed that the revelation just made had not in the slightest degree diminished the lawyer’s deferential manner towards his sister. “There are, you perceive, all the usual *dramatis personæ*: *la jeune première*”—a most profound bow; “*la dame noble*”—a less elaborate inclination towards Mrs. Richard Oakley; “and—and”—he glanced towards Mr. Conway; “but perhaps it might be deemed discourteous to pursue the analogy further.”

“What do you mean?” exclaimed that gentleman

with assumed fierceness, though evidently discomposed by the calm assurance of the lawyer.

"I will tell you," rejoined that courteous personage with his pleasantest smile. "Did you ever remark—but of course a gentleman of your intelligent observation must have often done so—that great rogues—nothing personal, I assure you, Mr. Conway——this Oakley is of course, as you represent him, a slandering lunatic; but still, as a general rule, you must have observed that great rogues are almost always great fools? In this very case now," continued Mr. Smart, resuming his seat, crossing his legs, and evidently greatly enjoying the eager curiosity which hung upon his words—"in this very case, supposing—only supposing, mind—that what we have heard is true, how except upon the principle of 'Quem Deus vult perdere prius dementat'—correct, I believe, Mr. Severn—or would you say 'primum?'"

"Go on—go on."

"How else, I say, could ordinarily sane persons imagine that the old-established firm of Smart and Figes would have left such an important document to a single chance of fire or other accident. The truth is, gentlemen—I beg ten thousand pardons—ladies and gentlemen; and, by the bye, Mr. Conway, you you have been in Paris I know—it appears to me that the politest nation in the world, as they call themselves, and in fact are in many respects, are strangely out with their 'messieurs at mesdames.'"

"The devil fly away with you and the politest nation into the bargain!" exclaimed Conway; "what is it you are driving at?"

"Take it coolly, pleasantly, Mr. Conway, as I always do," replied the lawyer with super-blandness. "The plain truth, then, since you will have it, is that the will of Sir Martin Biddulph was executed, as all wills ought to be, in duplicate; and that here," drawing a neatly-folded parchment from his pocket—"that here is the counterpart!"

The surprise, joy, exultation, mortification, and rage, excited in the breasts of that auditory by this announcement may be imagined better than described. Mr. Copway, followed by his confidant, left the house in an agony of rage and disappointment. A few days' reflection brought, however, enforced calm and resignation. He accepted the considerably-augmented annuity proffered by Mr. Severn, and sought employment and distinction in the ranks of the British armies then engaged in the terrific struggle with the French legions in Spain. He found both there, and in the bitter fight before Toulouse, the Gazette said, a glorious death. Hardy was never again heard of. He vanished into one of the sinks of society, and doubtless perished there.

The winding-up of the affairs of Mr. Robert Oakley, who, it was soon authoritatively declared, had been smitten with permanent lunacy—he had received a

heavy blow on the head, it was ascertained, doubtless at the fire—did not, thanks to the rise in the funds, and to the withdrawal of all claims due to the estate of Sir Martin Biddulph, wind up so disastrously as had been anticipated. After discharging all claims, including that directed by the dying commands of her mother to be paid, the large sum of which the firm of Cummings, Brothers, had been legally defrauded, Caroline found herself possessed of about £12,000—not a very splendid fortune, but sufficient, with the profits of her gallant, single-minded husband's profession, not only for her own and his moderate wishes, but for the future advantageous placing out of their numerous progeny, and for the present help and support of Caroline's God-stricken parent, who, helpless, dejected, utterly crazed, but harmless, passed his days in roaming about the grounds and garden, ever muttering to himself fantastic schemes of aggrandisement by successful speculations in the stock and money markets. He died at the age of fifty-eight, making no sign except that of his life—surely a vivid and instructive one to all who have the will and faculty to read it aright.

Mr. Smart's anticipation respecting the baronetcy was very speedily realised; and Sir Francis and Lady Severn, in the enjoyment of their mutual affection, their brilliant fortune and position, might be reckoned amongst the most favoured of mankind. There was no likelihood, either, that this baronetcy would lapse, by failure of heirs in the male line. A very happy woman,

doubtless, was Lady Severn, for she was good and amiable as fortunate; but anything like so *proud* a woman as her mother, Mrs. Richard Oakley, she assuredly was not, especially when that excellent lady had her quiver full of grandchildren. But it is time to close this somewhat garrulous narrative of long since passed, and, except to a few persons, almost forgotten events; and I perhaps cannot better do so than in the words of Mr. Twynham, who frankly admitted—I think it was on the day after the christening of the fourth, perhaps the fifth child—I am not sure which—that “gentleness, guilelessness, simplicity, beauty, and grace, may insure happiness even in extremely unequal marriages—a truth exemplified in the domestic lives of Sir Francis and Lady Severn.”

“An example, however, which ought not to be set down as a precedent,” said Mr. Smart, who was present; and I agree with him.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 4.—THE SECRET.

JEAN BAPTISTE VÉRON, a native, it was understood, of the south of France, established himself as a merchant at Havre-de-Grâce in 1788, being then a widower with one child, a young boy. The new-comer's place of business was on the south quay, about a hundred yards west of the custom-house. He had brought letters of high recommendation from several eminent Paris firms; his capital was ascertained to be large; and soon, moreover, approving himself to be a man of keen mercantile discernment, and measured, peremptory, unswerving business habits, it is not surprising that his commercial transactions speedily took a wide range, or that, at the end of about fifteen years, M. Véron was pronounced by general consent to be the wealthiest merchant of the commercial capital of northern France.

He was never, albeit, much of a favourite with any class of society : his manner was too *brusque*, decided, unbending—his speech too curt, frequently too bitter, for that ; but he managed to steer his course in very difficult times quite as safely as those who put themselves to great pains and charges to obtain popularity. He never expressed—publicly at least—any preference for Royalism, Republicanism, or Imperialism ; for *fleur-de-lis*, *bonnet-rouge*, or *tricolor* : in short, Jean Baptiste Véron was a stern, taciturn, self-absorbed man of business ; and, as nothing else was universally concluded, till the installation of a *quasi* legitimacy by Napoleon Bonaparte, when a circumstance, slight in itself, gave a clearer significance to the cold, haughty, repellent expression which played habitually about the merchant's gray, deep-set eyes, and thin, firmly-compressed lips. His newly-engraved private card read thus :—“*J. B. de Véron, Mon Séjour, Ingouville.*” Mon Séjour was a charming suburban domicile, situate upon the Côte, as it is usually termed—a sloping eminence on the north of Le Havre, which it commands, and now dotted with similar residences, but at the period we are writing of very sparsely built upon. Not long after this assumption of the aristocratic prefix to his name, it was discovered that he had insinuated himself into the very narrow and exclusive circle of the De Mérodes, who were an unquestionable fragment of the old noblesse, damaged, it is true, most irretrievably in purse, as their modest establish-

ment on the Côte too plainly testified ; but in pedigree as untainted and resplendent as in the palmiest days of the Capets. As the Chevalier de Mérode and his daughter Mademoiselle Henriette-Delphine-Hortense-Marie-Chasse-Loup de Mérode—described as a tall, fair, and extremely meagre damsel of about thirty years of age—were known to be rigidly uncompromising in all matters having reference to ancestry, it was concluded that Jean Baptiste de Véron had been able to satisfy his noble friends, that, although *de facto* a merchant from the sad necessities of the evil time, he was *de jure* entitled to take rank and precedence with the illustrious though decayed nobility of France. It might be, too, as envious gossips whispered, that any slight flaw or break in the chain of De Véron's patrician descent had been concealed or overlooked in the glitter of his wealth, more especially if it was true, as rumour presently began to circulate, that the immense sum—in French eyes and ears—of 300,000 francs (£12,000) was to be settled upon Mademoiselle de Mérode and her heirs on the day which should see her united in holy wedlock with Eugène de Véron, by this time a fine-looking young man of one or two and twenty, and, like ninety-nine in every hundred of the youth of France, strongly prejudiced *against* the pretensions of mere birth and hereditary distinction.

Rumour in this instance was correctly informed.

“Eugène,” said M. de Véron, addressing his son in his usual cold, positive manner, and at the same time

locking his private écritoire, the hand of the clock being just on the stroke of five, the hour for closing, “I have a matter of importance to inform you of. All differences between me and the Chevalier de Mérode relative to your marriage with his daughter, Mademoiselle de Mérode, are”—

“Hein!” ejaculated Eugène, suddenly whirling round upon his stool, and confronting his father. “Hein!”

“All differences, I say,” resumed M. de Véron with unruffled calm and decision, “between myself and the chevalier are arranged *à l’aimable*; and the contract of marriage will be ready for your and Mademoiselle de Mérode’s signature, on Monday next at two precisely.”

“Mine and Mademoiselle de Mérode’s!” repeated the astounded son, who seemed half doubtful whether he saw or heard aright.

“Yes. No wonder you are surprised. So distinguished a connection could hardly, under the circumstances, have been hoped for; and it would have been cruel to have given you an intimation on the subject whilst there was a chance of the negotiation issuing unfavourably. Your wife and you will, for the present at all events, take up your abode at Mon Séjour; and I must consequently look out at once for a smaller, a more bachelor-suiting residence.”

“My wife and me!” echoed Véron junior with the same air of stupid amazement as before—“My wife and me!” Recovering a little, he added: “Confound

it, there must be some mistake here. Do you know, *mon père*, that this Mademoiselle de Mérode is not at all to my taste? I would as soon marry"—

"No folly, Eugène, if you please," interrupted M. de Véron. "The affair, as I have told you, is decided. You will marry Mademoiselle de Mérode; or, if not," he added with iron inflexibility of tone and manner, "Eugène de Véron is likely to benefit very little by his father's wealth, which the said Eugène will do well to remember is of a kind not very difficult of transference beyond the range of the law of inheritance which prevails in France. The leprosy of the Revolution," continued M. de Véron as he rose and put on his hat, "may indeed be said to have polluted our very hearths, when we find children setting up their opinions, and likings and dislikings, forsooth! against their fathers' decision, in a matter so entirely within the parental jurisdiction as that of a son or daughter's marriage."

Eugène did not reply; and, after assisting his father—who limped a little in consequence of having severely sprained his ankle some eight or ten days previously—to a light one-horse carriage in waiting outside, he returned to the office, and resumed his seat, still in a maze of confusion, doubt, and dismay. "How could," he incoherently muttered—"how could my father—how could anybody suppose that— How could he especially be so blind as not to have long ago perceived — What a contrast!" added Eugène de Véron jumping up, breaking into passionate speech, and his

eyes sparkling as if he was actually in the presence of the dark-eyed divinity whose image filled his brain and loosed his tongue—"what a contrast ! Adéline, young, roseate, beautiful as Spring, lustrous as Juno, graceful as Hebe ! Oh, *par exemple*, Mademoiselle de Mérode, you, with your high blood and skinny bones, must excuse me. And poor, too, poor as Adéline ! Decidedly the old gentleman must be crazed, and—and let me see—Ay, to be sure, I must confer with Edouard at once."

Eugène de Véron had only one flight of stairs to ascend in order to obtain this conference, Edouard le Blanc, the brother of Adéline, being a principal clerk in the establishment. Edouard le Blanc readily and sincerely condoled with his friend upon the sudden obscuration of his and Adéline's hopes, adding that he had always felt a strong misgiving upon the subject ; and, after a lugubrious dialogue, during which the clerk hinted nervously at a circumstance which, looking at the unpleasant turn matters were taking, might prove of terrible import—a nervousness but very partially relieved by Eugène's assurance, that, come what may, he would take the responsibility in that particular entirely upon himself, as, indeed, he was bound to do—the friends left the office, and wended their way to Madame le Blanc's, Ingouville. There the lover forgot, in Adéline's gay, exhilarating presence and conversation, the recent ominous and exasperating communication from his father ; while Edouard proceeded to take immediate counsel with his mother upon the

altered aspect of affairs, not only as regarded Adéline and Eugène de Véron, but more particularly himself, Edouard le Blanc.

Ten minutes had hardly passed by ordinary reckoning—barely one by Eugène de Véron's—when his interview with the charming Adéline was rudely broken in upon by Madame le Blanc, a shrewd, prudent woman of the world, albeit that in this affair she had somewhat lost her balance, tempted by the glittering prize offered for her daughter's acceptance, and for a time apparently within her reach. The mother's tone and manner were stern and peremptory. "Have the kindness, Monsieur Eugène de Véron, to bid Adéline adieu at once. I have a serious matter to talk over with you alone. Come!"

Adéline was extremely startled at hearing her rich lover thus addressed, and the carnation of her glowing cheeks faded at once to lily paleness, whilst Eugène's features flushed as quickly to deepest crimson. He stammered out his willingness to attend madame immediately, and, hastily kissing Adéline's hand, followed the unwelcome intruder to another room.

"So, Monsieur Eugène," began Madame le Blanc, "this ridiculous wooing—of which, as you know, I never heartily approved—is at an end. You are, I hear, to marry Mademoiselle de Mérode in the early part of next week."

"Madame le Blanc," exclaimed the young man, "what is it you are saying? *I* marry Mademoiselle

de Mérode next or any other week! I swear to you, by all that is true and sacred, that I will be torn in pieces by wild horses before I break faith with"—

"Chut! chut!" interrupted Madame le Blanc; "you may spare your oaths. The sentimental bavardage of boys in love will be lost upon me. You will, as you ought, espouse Mademoiselle de Mérode, who is, I am told, a very superior and amiable person; and, as to Adéline, she will console herself. A girl with her advantages will always be able to marry sufficiently well, though not into the family of a millionaire. But my present business with you, Monsieur Eugène de Véron, relates to a different and much more important matter. Edouard has just confided to me a very painful circumstance. You have induced him to commit not only a weak but a highly criminal act: he has let you have, without Monsieur de Véron's consent or knowledge, two thousand francs, upon the assurance that you would either reimburse that sum before his accounts were balanced, or arrange the matter satisfactorily with your father."

"But, Madame le Blanc"—

"Neither of which alternatives," persisted that lady, "I very plainly perceive, you will be able to fulfil, unless you comply with Monsieur de Véron's wishes; and if you have any real regard for Adéline, you will signify that acquiescence without delay, for her brother's ruin would in a moral sense be hers also. Part of the money has, I understand, been squandered on the

presents you have made her: they shall be returned"—

"Madame le Blanc," exclaimed the excited young man, "you will drive me mad! I cannot, will not give up Adéline; and, as for the paltry sum of money you speak of—*my* money as it may fairly be considered—that shall be returned to-morrow morning."

Madame le Blanc did not speak for a few seconds, and then said: "Very well, mind you keep your promise. To-morrow is, you are aware, the Fête Dieu: we have promised Madame Carson of the Grande Rue to pass the afternoon and evening at her house, where we shall have a good view of the procession. Do you and Edouard call on us there, as soon as the affair is arranged. I will not detain you longer at present. Adieu! Stay, stay—by this door, if you please. I cannot permit you to see Adéline again, at all events till this money transaction is definitely settled."

"As you have now slept upon the proposal I communicated to you yesterday afternoon," said M. de Véron, addressing his son on the following morning at the conclusion of a silent breakfast, "you may perhaps be prepared with a more fitting answer than you were then?"

Eugène warmly protested his anxiety to obey all his father's reasonable commands; but in this case compliance was simply impossible, forasmuch as he, Eugène, had already irrevocably pledged his word, his heart, his honour, in another quarter, and could not therefore,

nay, would not, consent to poison his future existence by uniting himself with Mademoiselle de Mérode, for whom, indeed, he felt the profoundest esteem, but not the slightest emotion of affection or regard.

"Your word, your honour, your heart—you should have added your fortune," replied M. de Véron with frigid, slowly-distilled, sarcastic bitterness—"are irrevoably engaged, are they, to Adéline le Blanc, sister of my collecting clerk—daughter of a deceased sous-lieutenant of the line"—

"Of the Imperial Guard," interposed Eugène.

"Who aids her mother to eke out a scanty pension by embroidery"—

"Very superior, artistic embroidery," again interjected the son.

"Be it so. I have not been quite so unobservant, Eugène, of certain incidents, as you and your friends appear to have supposed. But time proves all things, and the De Mérotés and I can wait."

Nothing further passed till M. de Véron rose to leave the room, when his son, with heightened colour and trembling speech, although especially aiming at a careless indifference of tone and manner, said: "Sir—sir—one word, if you please. I have a slight favour to ask. There are a few debts, to the amount of about two thousand francs, which I wish to discharge immediately—this morning, in fact."

"Debts to the amount of about two thousand francs which you wish to discharge immediately—this

morning, in fact," slowly repeated De Véron, fixing on his son a triumphant, mocking glance, admirably seconded by the curve of his thin white lips. " Well, let the bills be sent to me. If correct and fair, they shall be paid."

" But—but, father, one, the chief item, is a debt of honour!"

" Indeed! Then your honour is pledged to others besides Mademoiselle *la brodeuse*? I have only to say that in that case I *will not* assist you." Having said this, M. de Véron, quite regardless of his son's angry expostulations, limped out of the apartment, and shortly after the sound of carriage-wheels announced his departure to Le Havre. Eugène about an hour afterwards followed, vainly striving to calm his apprehensions by the hope, that before the day for balancing Edouard's accounts arrived he should find his father in a more Christian-like and generous mood, or, at any rate, hit upon some means of raising the money.

The day, like the gorgeous procession that swept through the crowded streets, passed slowly and uninterruptedly away in M. de Véron's place of business, till about half-past four, when that gentleman directed a porter, who was leaving the private office, to inform M. le Blanc, that he, M. de Véron, wished to speak with him immediately. On hearing this order, Eugéne looked quickly up from the desk at which he was engaged, to his father's face; but he discerned nothing

on that impassive tablet either to dissipate or confirm his fear

“ Edouard le Blanc,” said M. de Véron, with mild suavity of voice the instant the summoned clerk presented himself, “ it so chances that I have no further occasion for your services ”—

“ Sir!—sir!” gasped the terrified young man.

“ You are,” continued M. de Véron, “ entitled to a month’s salary, in lieu of that period of notice—one hundred francs, with which you may credit yourself in the cash account you will please to balance and bring me as quickly as possible.”

“ Sir!—sir!” again bewilderedly iterated the panic-stricken clerk, as he turned distractedly from father to son—“ Sir! ”

“ My words are plain enough, I think,” observed M. de Véron, coolly tapping and opening his snuff-box, from which he helped himself to a hearty pinch. “ You are discharged with one hundred francs, a month’s salary in lieu of warning, in your pocket. You have now only to bring your accounts; they are correct, of course; I, finding them so, sign your *livret*, and there is an end of the matter.”

Edouard le Blanc made a step or two towards the door, and then, as if overwhelmed with a sense of the hopelessness of further concealment, turned round, threw himself with a cry of terror and despair at M. de Véron’s feet, and poured forth a wild, sobbing, scarcely intelligible confession of the fault or crime of

which he had been guilty, through the solicitations of M. Eugène, who had, he averred, received every farthing of the amount in which he, Edouard le Blanc, acknowledged himself to be a defaulter.

“ Yes!—yes! ” exclaimed the son ; “ Edouard gave the money into my hands, and if there is any blame, it is mine alone.”

M. de Véron listened with a stolid, stony apathy to all this, save for a slight glimmer of triumph that, spite of himself, shone out at the corners of his half-closed eyes. When the young man had ceased sobbing and exclaiming, he said : “ You admit, Edouard le Blanc, that you have robbed me of nearly two thousand francs, at, you say, the solicitation of my son—an excuse, you must be aware, of not the slightest legal weight; no more than if your pretty sister, Mademoiselle Adéline, who, I must be permitted to observe, is not altogether, I suspect, a stranger to this affair—Hear me out, Messieurs, if you please: I say your excuse has no more legal validity than if your sister had counselled you to commit this felony. Now, mark me, young man: it just upon five o’clock. At half-past seven precisely, I shall go before a magistrate, and cause a warrant to be issued for your apprehension. To-morrow morning, consequently, the brother of Mademoiselle le Blanc will either be an incarcerated felon, or, which will suit me just as well, a proclaimed fugitive from justice.”

“ One moment—one word, for the love of heaven,

before you go!" exclaimed Eugène. "Is there any mode, any means whereby Edouard may be rescued from this frightful, this unmerited calamity—this irretrievable ruin?"

"Yes," rejoined M. de Véron, pausing for an instant on the outer threshold, "there is one mode, Eugène, and only one. What it is, you do not require to be told. I shall dine in town to-day; at seven, I shall look in at the church of Notre Dame, and remain there precisely twenty minutes. After that, repentance will be too late."

Eugène was in despair, for it was quite clear that Adéline must be given up—Adéline whose myriad charms and graces rose upon his imagination in ten-fold greater lustre than before, now that he was about to lose her for ever! But there was plainly no help for it; and after a brief, agitated consultation, the young men left the office to join Madame and Mademoiselle le Blanc at the Widow Carson's in the Grande Rue, or Rue de Paris, as the only decent street in Havre-de-Grâce was at that time indifferently named, both for the purpose of communicating the untoward state of affairs, and that Eugène might take a lingering, last farewell of Adéline.

Before accompanying them thither, it is necessary to say a few words of this Madame Carson, who is about to play a very singular part in this little drama. She was a gay, well-looking, symmetrically-shaped young widow, who kept a confectioner's shop in the said

Grande Rue, and officiated as her own *dame du comptoir*. Her good looks, coquettishly-gracious smiles, and unvarying good temper, rendered her establishment much more attractive—it was by no means a brilliant affair in itself—than it would otherwise have been. Madame Carson was, in a tacit, quiet kind of way, engaged to Edouard le Blanc—that is to say, she intended marrying him as soon as their mutual savings should justify such a step ; and provided, also, that no more eligible offer wooed her acceptance in the meantime. M. de Véron himself was frequently in the habit of calling, on his way to or from Mon Séjour, for a pâté and a little lively badinage with the comely widow ; and so frequently, at one time, that Edouard le Blanc was half inclined—to Madame Carson's infinite amusement—to be jealous of the rich, though elderly merchant's formal and elaborate courtesies. It was on leaving her shop that he had slipped and sprained his ankle. M. de Véron fainted with the extreme pain, was carried in that state into the little parlour behind the shop, and had not yet recovered consciousness when the apothecary, whom Madame Carson had despatched her little waiting-maid-of-all-work in quest of, entered to tender his assistance. This is all, I think, that needs be said, in a preliminary way, of Madame Carson.

Of course, the tidings brought by Eugène and Edouard very painfully affected Mademoiselle le Blanc ; but, being a very sensible, as well as remarkably handsome young person, she soon rallied, and insisted, quite

as warmly as her mother did, that the sacrifice necessary to relieve Edouard from the peril which environed him—painful, heartbreaking as that sacrifice might be —must be submitted to without reserve or delay. In other words, that M. de Véron, junior, must consent to espouse Mademoiselle de Mérode, and forthwith inform his father that he was ready to sign the nuptial contract that moment if necessary. Poor Eugène, who was really over head and ears in love, and more so just then than ever, piteously lamented his own cruel fate, and passionately denounced the tiger-heartedness of his barbarian father; but, as tears and reproaches could avail nothing in such a strait, he finally submitted to the general award, and agreed to announce his submission to M. de Véron at the church of Notre Dame, not a moment later, both ladies insisted, than five minutes past seven.

Madame Carson was not at home all this while. She had gone to church, and, after devotions, called on her way back on one or two friends for a little gossip, so that it wanted only about a quarter to seven when she reappeared. Of course the lamentable story had to be told over again, with all its dismal accompaniments of tears, sighs, and plaintive ejaculations; and it was curious to observe, as the narrative proceeded, how the widow's charming eyes flashed and sparkled, and her cheeks glowed with indignation, till she looked, to use Edouard le Blanc's expression, “ferociously” handsome. “Le monstre!” she exclaimed, as Eugène ter-

minated the sad history, gathering up as she spoke the shawl and gloves she had just before put off; "but I shall see him at once: I have influence with this Monsieur de Véron."

"Nonsense, Emilie," said Madame de Blanc. "*You* possess influence over Monsieur de Véron!"

"Certainly I do. And is that such a miracle?" replied Madame Carson with a demure glance at Edouard le Blanc. Edouard looked somewhat scared, but managed to say: "Not at all, certainly not; but this man's heart is iron—steel."

"We shall see," said the fair widow, as she finished drawing on her gloves. "*La grande passion* is sometimes stronger than iron or steel: is it not, Monsieur Eugène? At all events, I shall try. He is in the church, you say. Very well, if I fail—but I am sure I shall *not* fail—I return in ten minutes, and that will leave Mademoiselle Adéline's despairing lover plenty of time to make his submission, if better may not be; and so *au revoir*, Mesdames et Messieurs."

"What can she mean?" said Madame le Blanc as the door closed. "I have noticed, once or twice during the last fortnight, that she has made use of strange half-hints relative to Monsieur de Véron."

"I don't know what she can mean," said Edouard le Blanc, seizing his hat and hurrying off; but I shall follow, and strive to ascertain."

He was just in time to catch a glimpse of Madame Carson's skirts as they whisked round the corner of

the Rue St. Jacques, and, by quickening his speed, he saw her enter the church from that street. Notre Dame was crowded; but Edouard le Blanc had no difficulty in singling out M. de Véron, who was sitting in his accustomed chair, somewhat removed from the mass of worshippers, on the left of the high altar; and presently he discerned Madame Carson gently and adroitly making her way through the crowd towards him. The instant she was near enough, she tapped him slightly on the shoulder. He turned quickly, and stared with a haughty, questioning glance at the smiling confectioner. There was no *grande passion* in that look, Edouard felt quite satisfied, and Madame Carson's conduct seemed more than ever unintelligible. She appeared to say something, which was replied to by an impatient gesture of refusal, and M. de Véron turned again towards the altar. Madame Carson next approached close to his chair, and, bending down, whispered in his ear for perhaps a minute. As she did so, M. de Véron's body rose slowly up, involuntarily as it were, and stiffened into rigidity, as if under the influence of some frightful spell. Forcing himself at last, it seemed, to confront the whisperer, he no sooner caught her eye than he reeled like one struck by a heavy blow against the pedestal of a saint, whose stony features looked less white and bloodless than his own. Madame Carson contemplated the effect she had produced with a kind of pride for a few moments, and then, with a slight but peremptory wave of

her hand, motioned him to follow her out of the sacred edifice. M. de Véron hastily, though with staggering steps, obeyed; Edouard le Blanc crossing the church and reaching the street just soon enough to see them both driven off in M. de Véron's carriage.

Edouard hurried back to the Grande Rue to report what he had witnessed; and what could be the interpretation of the inexplicable scene, engrossed the inventive faculties of all there, till they were thoroughly tired of their wild and aimless guesses. Eight o'clock chimed—nine—ten—and they were all, Edouard especially, working themselves into a complete panic of undefinable apprehension, when, to their great relief, M. de Véron's carriage drew up before the door. The first person to alight was M. Bourdon, a notary of eminence; next M. de Véron, who handed out Madame Carson; and all three walked through the shop into the back-apartment. The notary wore his usual business aspect, and had in his hands two rolls of thickly-written parchment, which he placed upon the table, and at once began to spread out. M. de Véron had the air of a man walking in a dream, and subdued, mastered by some overpowering, nameless terror; while Madame Carson, though pale with excitement, was evidently highly elated, and, to use a French phrase, completely “mistress of the situation.” She was the first to break silence.

“ Monsieur de Véron has been kind enough, Edouard, to explain, in the presence of Monsieur Bourdon, the

mistake in the accounts he was disposed to charge you with to-day. He quite remembers, now, having received two thousand francs from you, for which, in his hurry at the time, he gave you no voucher. Is not that so, Monsieur de Véron ? ” she added, again fixing on the merchant the same menacing look that Le Blanc had noticed in the church.

“ Yes, yes,” was the quick reply of M. de Véron, who vainly attempted to look the astounded clerk in the face. “ The mistake was mine. Your accounts are quite correct, Monsieur le Blanc ; and—and I shall be glad, of course, to see you at the office as usual.”

“ That is well,” said Madame Carson ; “ and now, Monsieur Bourdon, to business, if you please. Those documents will not take so long to read as they did to write.”

The notary smiled, and immediately began reading a marriage-contract between Eugène de Véron and Adéline le Blanc, by which it appeared that the union of those young persons was joyfully acceded to by Jean Baptiste de Véron and Marie le Blanc, their parents—the said Jean Baptiste de Véron binding himself formally to endow the bride and bridegroom jointly, on the day of marriage, with the sum of 300,000 francs, and, moreover, to admit his son as a partner in the business, thenceforth to be carried on under the name of De Véron and Son.

This contract was written in duplicate, and as soon as the notary had finished reading Madame Carson

handed a pen to M. de Véron, saying in the same light, coquettish, but peremptory tone as before: "Now, Monsieur, quick, if you please: yours is the most important signature." The merchant signed and sealed both parchments, and the other interested parties did the same, in silent, dumb bewilderment, broken only by the scratching of the pens and the legal words repeated after the notary. "We need not detain you longer, Messieurs, I believe," said Madame Carson. "*Bon soir, Monsieur de Véron,*" she added, extended an ungloved hand to that gentleman, who faintly touched it with his lips; "you will hear from me to-morrow."

"What is the meaning of all this?" exclaimed Eugène de Véron, the instant his father and the notary disappeared. "I positively feel as if standing upon my head!" A chorus of like interrogatories from the Le Blancs assailed Madame Carson, whose ringing bursts of mirth mocked for a time their impatience.

"Meaning, *parbleu!*!" she at last replied, after pausing to catch breath. "That is plain enough, surely. Did you not all see with what *empressement* the poor man kissed my hand? There, don't look so wretched, Edouard," she added with a renewed outburst; "perhaps I may have the caprice to prefer you after all to an elderly millionaire—who knows? But come, let us try to be a little calm and sensible. What I have done, good folks, I can as easily undo; and,

that being the case, Monsieur Eugène must sign me a bond to-morrow morning for fifty thousand francs, payable three days after his marriage. Is it agreed? Very well: then I keep these two parchments till the said bond is executed; and now, my friends, good night, for I, as you may believe, am completely tired after all this benevolent fairy-work."

The wedding took place on the next day but one, to the great astonishment of every one acquainted with the two families. It was also positively rumoured that M. de Véron had proposed marriage to Madame Carson, and been refused! Be this true or not, it was soon apparent that, from some cause or other, M. de Véron's health and spirits were irretrievably broken down, and, after lingering out a mopish, secluded life of scarcely a twelvemonth's duration, that gentleman died suddenly at Mon Séjour. A clause in his will bequeathed 20,000 francs to Madame Carson, with an intimated hope that it would be accepted as a pledge by that lady to respect, as she hitherto had done, the honour of an ancient family.

This pledge to secrecy would no doubt have been kept, but that, rumours of poisoning and suicide, in connection with De Véron's death, having got abroad, the Procureur-Général ordered an investigation to take place. The suspicion proved groundless; but the *procès-verbal* set forth, that on examining the body of the deceased there were discovered the letters "I. de B.," "T. F.," branded on the front of the left shoulder;

the two last, initials of “*Travaux Forcés*” (forced labour), being large and very distinct. There could be no doubt, therefore, that the proud M. de Véron was an escaped *forcat*; and subsequent investigation, which was not, however, very strongly pressed, sufficiently proved that Jean Baptiste de Véron, the younger son of a high family, had in very early youth been addicted to wild courses; that he had gone to the colonies under a feigned name, to escape difficulties at home, and, whilst at the Isle de Bourbon, had been convicted of premeditated homicide at a gaming-house, and sentenced to perpetual imprisonment with hard labour. Contriving to escape, he had returned to France, and, by the aid of a considerable legacy, commenced a prosperous mercantile career; how terminated, we have just seen. It was by pure accident, or what passes for such in the world, that Madame Carson had arrived at a knowledge of the terrible secret. When M. de Véron, after spraining his ankle, was carried in a state of insensibility into the room behind her shop, she had immediately busied herself in removing his neckcloth, unfastening his shirt, then a flannel one which fitted tightly round the neck, and thus obtained a glimpse of the branded letters “T. F.” With her customary quickness of wit, she instantly replaced the shirts, neckcloth, &c., and carefully concealed the fatal knowledge she had acquired till an opportunity of using it advantageously should present itself.

The foregoing are, I believe, all the reliable particulars known of a story of which there used to be half a hundred different versions flying about Le Havre. Edouard le Blanc married Madame Carson, and subsequently became a partner of Eugène de Véron. It was not long, however, before the business was removed to another and distant French seaport, where, for aught I know to the contrary, the firm of "De Véron and Le Blanc" flourishes to this day.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 5.—THE LOVE-CHARM.

A DARK, wintry day, in the year of grace 1839, was closing upon the final scene of one of those tragedies of real life which would be affecting, were they not, in France at least, of such everyday occurrence. Eugène Beaudésert, the direct representative of a long line of courtiers, warriors, diplomatists, commencing with the Merovingian kings, and now for some time schoolmaster in Lyon, was dying in a mean apartment *au troisième* of a house in an obscure street of that wealthy and splendid city; not, however, of want, of physical destitution, as the wine, cordials, and various tempting delicacies by his bedside, the heaped-up blazing fagots on the hearth, the presence of an unexceptionable nurse, and, above all, of M. Vermont, a physician of eminence, whose minutes were Napo-

leons, fully testified. Nor, still judging by its surroundings, ought unsatisfied soul-cravings, hunger of the spirit, to have been felt at that death-bed, since two ministers to spiritual needs, one officious, the other official, were in attendance there. The first, a stout, somewhat rustic-looking man, past middle age, at the entrance of the Abbé Morlaix, the famous preacher at the Church of Assumption, had hastily returned his balm for hurt minds, Plato's *Divine Dialogue*, to his pocket, and shrunk back to a corner of the room where the fire-blaze revealed him with but fitful indistinctness. I, however, from knowing Jules Delpech so well, can easily identify, through the flashing gloom, that large head, fairly developed intellectually, and that face every way ordinary save for a pair of glittering gray eyes ; which, from under cover of the pent-house brows, pierce to a very long way off—further, deeper, indeed, than it is desirable to follow, even in imagination. The countenance withal has not what is usually termed a malignant expression. The most timid person, a girl, would hardly be scared at confronting it upon a lonely road in the evening of such another dark day as this ; for plainly, vividly, as that unblest, bastard wisdom called cunning, caution, timidity, are written thereon for dullest eyes to read, there is also a certain air of *bonhomie*, assumed it may be—but, if so, habitually assumed—which does much to neutralise the vulpine craftiness of aspect which familiar observers were wont to say faithfully mirrored

Jules Delpech's vulpine, crafty soul. A rash judgment, let us hope, in submission to the Divine injunction of charity—the charity that thinketh no evil, believeth no evil, with which M. Morlaix, a few minutes since, just before the arrival of the physician, rebuked the moribund's glare of rage, called forth by a somewhat eulogistic allusion to Madame la Baronne de Vautpré; the personage albeit to whom Eugène Beaudésert is indebted for the lay and clerical ministrations which console, or embitter—for there is no interpreting the changeful lights and shadows which flit across that constrainedly calm white face—these last supreme moments of parting life.

There was no warning of how few those moments were in the suave tones of Dr. Vermont, as he felt the pulse and looked steadily into the eyes of his patient. He merely observed, addressing the nurse, that M. Beaudésert must be kept as quiet as possible, and then turned away with a slight gesture to the abbé, who followed him to the door, where a few whispered words passed between them. The look and manner of the abbé, as he again turned towards the sick man, revealed, clearly as speech, the significance of those whispered words; and Jules Delpech, starting up, hurriedly embraced, and bade his friend adieu, as if for a brief time only, pressed one of the cold hands of a girl sitting by the head of the bed in both his own, softly suggested hope and courage, and glided from the apartment. The nurse, at a sign from the abbé,

did the same, and then the reverend gentleman requested the girl to permit him to speak for a few minutes with her father alone. The answer was an outburst of convulsive grief—passionate exclamations of refusal, which the abbé could only partially calm by consenting that she should remain whilst he administered the last rites of his church to the now avowedly dying sufferer; whose thoughts, whilst fully comprehending, as he seemed to do, the abbé's meaning and purpose, were nevertheless—if one might judge by the feeble demonstrations permitted by his fast-failing strength—with his child, with the earthly future of that young life; and but slightly impressed by the imminence of his own death, and the judgment to follow, announced by the symbolic ceremonial and the solemn words of the priest.

And now, whilst the abbé is fulfilling his appointed function, I may briefly pass in review the previous and determining incidents of the life-career thus prematurely closing; closing prematurely, there can be no question, as far as life is reckoned by length of days, for it was no longer ago than the autumn of 1803, that the birth of Eugène Beaudésert, the first-born of a distinguished general of that name, and Estelle, his wife, *née* Bresson, a rich heiress of Paris, was celebrated in that city with much pomp and *éclat*. Clouds quickly overgrew and darkened the brilliant future that seemed to await the child. General Beaudésert was killed at Marengo; and his

widow, to whom, by the provisions of the ante-nuptial contract, her whole fortune reverted, soon married again, became the mother of a numerous family, and gradually so estranged from her first-born that after his tenth birthday she never again beheld him, and died without expressing a wish to do so. It is probable that this unnatural feeling was excited and confirmed by the civilly contemptuous treatment which the plebeian wife of General Beaudésert had met with from her husband's family ; one of that section of the Quartier St. Germain which, always with an *arrière-pensée*, capitulated with the Consulate and the Empire for the profitable honours, illegitimate as they might be, and, of course, were, with which it was the weakness of the Man of Destiny to always eagerly reward such condescendence. Madame la Baronne de Vautpré, General Beaudésert's widowed and childless sister, had especially never been at pains to conceal her disdain of her brother's ignoble alliance ; and no sooner was it ascertained that *ci-devant* Madame Beaudésert, *née* Bresson, evinced a decided dislike of her son Eugène, than Madame la Baronne became his active partisan and patroness ; and an arrangement was finally come to by which the guardianship of the last male scion of the ancient house of Beaudésert was legally transferred from the *roturier* mother to the aristocratic aunt. Madame de Vautpré discharged her new self-imposed duties, everybody agreed, in the most liberal, exemplary manner. Eugène Beaudésert's

education was conducted by the first masters; his purse was supplied without stint or grudge; and he had but just completed his eighteenth year when Madame la Baronne obtained the high favour and honour of a commission in the *Garde Royale* for her fortunate nephew. But, as most of us know, or have heard, blood is stronger than water, especially that which wells up from the mighty arteries which nourish and sustain the common life of a people; and Eugène's precociously manifested tastes, antipathies, predilections—all clearly traceable to his maternal origin—proved to be diametrically opposed to the tastes, antipathies, predilections of the long line of Beaudésert celebrities dating from the Merovingian kings; not one of whom, that unfilial descendant of a noble race sneeringly remarked, could be justly accused of having stained his scutcheon by doing anything useful or helpful to mankind. As examples of the young man's shocking heterodoxy in matters ancestral and armorial, I may instance his proclaimed opinion, that there were in the world men as capable of governing France as Louis le Désiré—an extravagance which cost him his *Garde Royale* epaulets; that Napoleon was at least equal as a general to the great Condé; and that to have created “a connoisseur in dry bones”—otherwise Cuvier, the comparative anatomist—a baron, was *not a* detestable desecration by Bonaparte of that order of nobility! That atrocities like these should so frequently sully the lips of her nephew and heir, was

naturally a source of disquiet to Madame de Vautpré; but, to do that lady simple justice, she was far too right-minded and sensible a person to take *au sérieux* the froth-follies which flow so copiously from the lips of vain and volatile youth; and she more than once took occasion to observe in his hearing, that, so long as her nephew *did* nothing in derogation of his high lineage, whatever he might think or say would not affect his present or future position as far as she had control over it. Eugène Beaudésert was in his twentieth year when Madame la Baronne felt or fancied that it might be expedient to at once clearly define *what* it was that to do, or to leave undone, would fatally compromise the young man's future. She did so in the mild, impassive manner natural to her, after placing in his hand a draft on Lafitte for the large sum he had just intimated an immediate and pressing occasion for.

"You were conversing for some time, I noticed, at the ball the other evening, with the Count and Mademoiselle de Cevennes, what, frankly now, is your impression, Eugène, of the young lady?"

"My impression of Mademoiselle de Cevennes! Frankly, then, no impression at all—except, *ma foi*, the vague one of a perfectly well-dressed commonplace young person, nowise distinguishable from the crowd of perfectly well-dressed commonplace young persons we met there."

"I have reason to believe," continued Madame de

Vautpré, "that the proposal of an alliance by marriage of the Beauédésert and Cevennes families would be favourably entertained by Monsieur le Comte de Cevennes."

"*Plait-il, madame!*!" exclaimed the startled nephew, flushing scarlet.

"In other, though scarcely plainer words," resumed Madame de Vautpré, "that were Eugène Beauédésert to become a suitor for the hand of Louise de Cevennes, he would not be exposed to the mortification of a refusal."

"You must be jesting, madame," rejoined the nephew with some temper. "What have I done, that it should be proposed to wed me with such an incarnation of ugliness, ill-temper, and Satanic pride, as Mademoiselle de Cevennes?"

"That is your *vague* impression of the lady, is it? It is not a flattering one, at all events; and do not fear, Eugène, that I shall ever urge you to blaspheme the holy sacrament of marriage"—I should here state that it had been for some time whispered in certain circles that Madame la Baronne de Vautpré was growing terribly devout—"by uniting yourself indissolubly with a woman you could not love or esteem; however"—

"*Ma chère tante,*" interrupted Eugène, seizing Madame de Vautpré's hand, and kissing it with fervour, "you are so good."

"It is well, at the same time, to remind you,

Eugène," continued Madame la Baronne, with her usual calm smile and quiet evenness of voice, "that I expect from you a similar abnegation of selfish feeling in the affair of marriage—which is to say, that you will never think of uniting yourself with a person whom *I* could not love or esteem! Above and before all, Eugène"—and here the speaker's earnestness lent almost tragic force and depth to Madame de Vautpré's mild, steadfast look, and tranquil, measured tones—"do not fail to bear constantly in mind that to follow your father's unhappy example, by contracting a *mésalliance*, would be simply and definitively to pronounce irrevocable sentence upon yourself—not merely of immediate separation between you and me, but of the forfeiture of your else assured inheritance of the large possessions, which are, as you are aware, at my absolute disposal."

"My dear madam," Eugène managed to enunciate without much stammering, and with an affectation of unconcern with which his changing colour and altogether discomfited aspect did not harmonise, "you do not imagine, you do not suppose, that *I*—that you—that"—

"I suppose nothing, imagine nothing, Eugène," interrupted the stately baronne, locking her *écritoire*, and rising to terminate the interview; "I merely state as a fact to be carefully borne in mind, that were you so insane as to contract a discreditible marriage—and by discreditible marriage I mean one that I could not

sanction—you from that moment would be my nephew in name only, assuredly in nothing more. Do you return to dine? No; well, I shall be sure to meet you at Madame Morny's. Adieu."

An indifferent passer-by would have been struck by the extreme disquietude evinced by Eugène Beaudésert as he left his aunt's splendid mansion; but in life's careless April-time the clouds pass swiftly; and one little hour had scarcely elapsed since Madame de Vautpré's words had fallen so ominously upon his ear, when they were remembered only as the casual expression of a hasty resolve, which could never be carried out; for was not he, Eugène Beaudésert, the only living being through whom the name, the glory, and the greatness of the Beaudéserts could be preserved, and continued for the admiration and reverence of unborn ages! That great irreversible fact would necessarily outweigh all minor considerations, when poised in so very ancestral a mind as that of Madame de Vautpré, who had, besides, displayed such Christian kindness in relation to that abominable Mademoiselle de Cevennes—the young lady that had graciously, it seemed, intimated—the amiable Gorgon!—that she would not refuse him the blessing of her hand, should he venture to solicit the precious gift. Ugh!

The repulsive idea thus suggested quickly gave place to another and very different one—that of *cette jeune et charmante Adrienne*, whom it would be impossible

not to love, were her father, instead of being a *capitaine de dragons en retraite*, a Paris shopkeeper. At that moment the church clocks chimed half-past two, reminding the young dreamer that by the time he had reached the jeweller's, and received in exchange for his munificent aunt's draft the superb necklace upon which Adrienne Champfort had set her heart, it would be as much as he could do to reach Clichy by the hour he had appointed to be there. This was decisive ; and by three o'clock Eugène Beaudésert, with the necklace—a trifle which cost him five thousand francs, no more—safe in his pocket, was rattling gaily along the road leading to the modest dwelling of his beautiful *fiancée*, and then onwards, downwards, to marriage, remorse, ruin, despair—finally, to the dark room *au troisième* in the Rue du Bac, Lyon, where the Abbé Morlaix is even now administering the *viaticum* to the heir of all the Beaudéserts ! An old, sad story, of which I need only further give the headings of the chapters intervening between the bridal and the burial.

Madame la Baronne de Vautpré was informed of the marriage of Eugène Beaudésert with Adrienne Champfort by a long and eloquent letter from the bridegroom ; to which an immediate answer was returned, enclosing a draft for ten thousand francs, and briefly stating that Madame de Vautpré wished Monsieur and Madame Beaudésert happiness in the state of life they had chosen for themselves ; but, as Monsieur Beaudésert had been timely and emphatically warned would be the

case, Madame de Vautpré no longer looked upon that gentleman as her nephew, or as one possessing the slightest further claim upon her.

It was all in vain, as the ten thousand francs, and at last the costly ornaments which he had lavished upon Adrienne, melted away, that the alarmed and anxious husband and father—two daughters, Adrienne and Clarisse, were born to him during the first three years of wedded life—put in practice every expedient, every art he was master of, to change his aunt's inexorable decision ; Madame de Vautpré was impassible as marble, and as smooth and polished also ; her words and manner, in the personal interviews which her nephew contrived to force upon her, whilst clearly expressive of unswerving resolve, never betraying the slightest irritation or anger.

Thus, step by step, poverty came upon the rash couple ; the poverty, armed with serpent stings, that treads upon the heels of reckless self-gratification, and which, but for Captain Champfort's pension—a rather considerable one for his position, he being an inferior member of the Legion of Honour—would soon have been destitution ; for Eugène Beaudésert, with all his wordy disdain of birth-privileges, persisted in keeping himself fiercely aloof from the contamination of *useful* employments, and none other were obtainable. And did the blind god that had lured them to such a pass, remain to gild the ruin he had made, to light up with his glowing torch the

else drear dwelling where sat Indigence with his black feet upon the cheerless hearth, and Want, ever at the threshold, and waiting but for the death of that white-headed, feeble old man to enter in, deepened the thick gloom with his gaunt forecast shadow? Alas! how could it be so? Was it possible that the enchanting smile with which Adrienne Champfort received the necklace we know of from her delighted lover, should cast its radiance upon the pawn-ticket of that same costly bauble, which her husband, then of some seven sad years' standing, placed in her hand with a sour, fretful caution to put it safely away? The truth was, neither had espoused the intended person. Eugène Beaudésert, Mademoiselle Champfort's idolising admired, was the nephew of Madame de Vautpré, heir to the splendid mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain, and the magnificent Château d'Em, near Lyon, of which she had heard so much—a young gentleman, moreover, having free warren of all the jewellers' shops and *modiste* establishments in Paris, the *entrée* of Tuileries balls, and possessed of a thousand other transferable and charming gifts and privileges—surely a very different person from the pale, care-worn, listless man, whose stockings she darned with delicate fingers, at the faintest pressure whereof, in the old fast-fading time, those now downcast, unregardful eyes had flashed with rapture! And, though still retaining much of her brilliant form and feature-beauty, was Madame Beaudésert, wan wife and mother, eternally busied with household cares, necessarily negligent of

the elegances of attire, impatient of the present, regretting the past, the fairy being pictured in the youthful imagination of Eugène Beaudésert as the honoured and admired mistress of his inherited splendours, the grace and genius of the courtly circles to which it would be his chiefest pride to have raised her? Clearly not. Do not suppose that biting, bitter words—hasty and quickly repented of, it may be—such as escaped Adrienne's lips, when, as she was walking with her husband and children in the hot, dusty Champs Elysées, Charles Baudin, the rich grocer's son, whose hand she had refused for that of Madame de Vautpré's nephew, dashed past in his new cabriolet with Madame Baudin, his richly apparelled, very pretty wife by his side—words which ever after rankle in the memory, did not frequently pass between Monsieur and Madame Beaudésert. And yet she was not, as the world goes, an unaffectionate wife and mother, nor he a bad, unloving husband and father. Both possessed amiable qualities—amiable qualities, I mean, of an ordinary degree—and we know that none but those supremely angelic, unflawed natures, whose only ascertainable dwelling-place, in my experience, is the brains of boys, girls, and authors, can illumine the bleak wastes of life with perennial radiance, make constant sunshine in the shadiest places, sing ceaseless songs of gladness upon empty stomachs, and delightedly disport themselves in the lowest social quagmires, from whatever height thereto hurled down!

To that bright band Monsieur and Madame Beau-

désert assuredly did not belong. They, however, rubbed along disconsolately, till the death, in 1836, of Captain Champfort; when Eugène, roused to spasmodic exertion, left his wife and youngest child Clarisse at Clichy with the widow, and set out on foot with his daughter, dreamy Adrienne, for the Château d'Em, where Madame de Vautpré had for some years constantly resided, determined upon one more effort, if not to regain her goodwill, at least to wrest from her by importunity the means of modest existence. His aunt refused to see him, and returned his letters unopened; wearied out at length, as well as seriously warned by the authorities, that to persist in his annoyance of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré would bring unpleasant consequences upon himself, he —by the advice of his new friend, Jules Delpech, at whose house, distant about a league from the château, he had taken up his temporary abode—hired an apartment in the Rue du Bac, Lyon, and, chiefly in the hope of touching his aunt's heart through her pride, advertised in the local papers that Eugène Beaudésert, ex-captain of the Garde Royale, gave lessons in reading, writing, arithmetic, and elementary mathematics. This notable expedient failed as completely as all previous ones. Madame de Vautpré was immovable by such feeble devices; but a more potent agent than the disinherited descendant of the Beaudéserts was at hand, bringing fullest relief to the sufferer, and rebuke, remorse to his obdurate, pitiless

relative. Eugène Beaudésert fell suddenly ill; the long fever of despair had at length consumed the golden oil of life, and the *sœur de charité* whose mission of mercy took her to that poor abode saw that yet a few hours and the divine lamp would expire on earth, to be relumed only in His presence whose breath first touched it with celestial fire. Having clearly possessed herself of the melancholy story, sister Agnes lost no time in endeavouring to secure the good offices of the Abbé Morlaix, who, she knew, was the confessor of Madame de Vautpré, reputedly one of the most devout ladies of France. This was not a difficult task; and the abbé, first visiting the moribund, hastened at once to the great lady's presence. Never was the abbé's sonorous eloquence more vigorously exerted; and as he, with the authority of a church of which Madame de Vautpré was a fanatical adherent, entreated, menaced, commanded, her obduracy and pride of heart, insensible to the pleadings of humanity, yielded to religious terrors; before the interview terminated, it was settled that all money could do to avert or delay the stroke of the destroyer was to be essayed, and that, should her nephew not recover, his eldest daughter, Adrienne, was to be received at the Château d'Em, avowedly as Madame de Vautpré's heiress. One condition, however, was peremptorily insisted upon; which was, that Adrienne should be separated from her family, who would be permitted to see her

once only in each year; the mother and sister to be paid a yearly pension of four thousand francs during Madame de Vautpré's pleasure, which meant so long as they and Adrienne rigorously complied with the condition of separation from each other. This arrangement Eugène Beaudésert readily though ungraciously acquiesced in—I mean that he neither felt nor affected gratitude for the tardy and fear-extorted concession—and he commanded his reluctant daughter to comply therewith when he was gone, as she valued his blessing and her mother and sister's welfare.

Of that young girl—of Adrienne Beaudésert, whom we just now saw passionately refuse to abandon for a moment the post assigned to her by filial love and duty—I have not as yet spoken, though it is around her the interest of this narrative will mainly gather. It will, however, be only necessary in this place to premise that Adrienne Beaudésert will be thirteen on her next birthday, that she is well formed and tall of her age, and that her now death-pale complexion, eyes swollen and red with weeping, loose untended hair, obscure a beauty as exquisite as that of her mother at the same age; whilst even through that clouding vale of tears and terror the infantine candour, the faith—how shall I express myself?—the simple trustfulness, verging upon credulity, that marks her character, is strikingly apparent. There are lines, however faint, nascent as yet, indicative of firmness about her sweet, rose-lipped mouth, which

cannot be too soon developed and confirmed. That simple, credulous predisposition has unhappily been fostered, exaggerated by the education, if it can be called one, she has received, chiefly from her grandmother, an honest, simple-minded native of Provence, who has peopled the child's mind with the thousand-and-one legends of fairies, demons, witch-charms, potent alike for good and evil, received as gospel-truth in that part of France ; and in which her granddaughter believes as firmly as in the ogre-like instincts of the dreaded relative to whose abhorred companionship or custody her father's last commands have doomed her. Childhood's common dreams, it may be said. Yes, but will they, as such illusions usually do, exhale and pass away in the expanding light of reason, or remain hidden, latent in the mind of Adrienne Beaudésert, till, under stimulating conditions, they start into fatal life and activity ? This is the yet unsolved enigma of the story of the Love-Charm.

The prayers are done ; the holy oil has dried upon the forehead of the anointed, tenantless clay, by the side whereof Adrienne Beaudésert is lying in a stupor of despair, which the nurse, gliding noiselessly about the room, does not think it prudent to disturb. We also will depart, following the abbé, who goes straight to the Château d'Em. The face of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré whitens visibly through the thick rouge, as she listens to the reverend man's tidings ;

and, the moment his voice ceases, she hastens to place in his hands a large sum to be expended in masses for the dead man's soul. As to the funeral of the last male heir of the Beaudéserts, who is to be entombed in the catacombs of the Church of the Assumption, Madame de Vautpré desires that no expense shall be spared thereon ; and the child Adrienne is to be assured that the heart of her too long estranged relative is yearning to embrace, to love, to cherish her. Monsieur Morlaix, moreover, who is shortly going to Paris on business, undertakes to be the bearer of one year's pension in advance, with the donor's good wishes, to Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert at Clichy.

The chief facts just related, having been thought worthy of more than one paragraph in the local papers, and being skilfully marvelised to suit the public taste, had the effect of attracting a numerous concourse of curious spectators to the funeral—one of the most imposing, it was on all hands agreed, the *Pompes Funèbres* had got up for many years. The catafalque, especially, was magnificent ; so much so, that the crowded congregation were divided in opinion as to which was most solemn and effective—it, the catafalque, or the Abbé Morlaix's funeral oration, grounded upon the Scripture verse, “ Whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him.” The abbé's eloquent illustrations of his theme were also variously interpreted. Some held that they applied to the relentless cruelty of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré, punished by the untimely

death, without male issue, of the heir to her house's honours; others, that the preacher had in mind the nephew's sin of ingratitude and disobedience towards his guardian and benefactress, resulting in misery and an early grave. Of this last opinion was Adrienne Beaudésert, upon whose heart the words of the abbé smote like so many sword-stabs aimed at her dead father, exciting in the mind of the wounded, sensitive girl a feeling of resentment towards the reverend orator not, unhappily, to be soon or easily effaced. Of all the obsequious attendants surrounding her, there was not one who felt, or successfully assumed to feel, the slightest sympathy with her bitter grief. It was the less surprising, therefore—terribly indecorous in the heiress of Madame de Vautpré as it might be—that, upon recognising Jules Delpech in the crowd, as she was leaving the church, Mademoiselle Beaudésert darted away from her *entourage*, and threw herself sobbing violently into the grey-headed man's arms. She was, of course, promptly plucked back to her proper place in the procession, and a few minutes afterwards driven rapidly off to her future residence, the Château d'Em. Jules Delpech seemed to be not a little disconcerted, as well as astonished, at so sudden and public a demonstration of the young lady's regard; but, the first flurry over, the emotion it excited, coloured, shaped, by an elastic, sanguine imagination, assumed a hopeful, brilliant hue, as those telescopic eyes of his, piercing, as I have said, far into the dim

future, descried the yet distant possibilities suggested by such pregnant facts as Mademoiselle Beaudésert's partiality or respect for himself so openly manifested ; the well-remembered and marked partiality evinced towards Paul, his young and handsome son, by the unsophisticated heiress of an ailing lady long since passed her grand climacteric, when she, the heiress, was domiciled with her father at his cottage, furnishing, with minor collateral facts or fancies, ample material for castle-building. The subtle brain of Jules Delpech was glowing, palpitating with the crowding images it had conjured up by the time he reached his own door ; whence, looking upwards in the direction of the Château d'Em, it seemed to him that the central tower of the splendid pile, high overtopping the intervening belt of forest trees, looked haughtily and contemptuously down upon the lowly hut whose habitant dared to lift himself even in imagination to that lordly eminence ! "For all that," muttered the white lips of Jules Delpech, as he entered his cottage and closed the door, "worse cards than we hold have won as great a game. 'What,' said the great orator of the Mountain, 'is the secret and condition of an else impossible success ?—*de l'audace, et encore de l'audace*' —and *moral* audacity, where failure incurs no peril, niggard nature has *not* denied me."

Jules Delpech was a *capitaine de douanes en retraite*, or, as we say, a superannuated officer of customs. His retiring pension was a small one, but the cottage

in which he lived, and about three acres of adjoining land, were his own by inheritance ; and, as both himself and son—a really fine lad, about three years older than Adrienne Beaudésert, of pleasant manners and somewhat superior education—were sufficiently skilful and industrious cultivators, the retired *douanier* was looked upon, and really was, for his social status, a thriving, prosperous man. In one respect, Jules Delpech deserves commendation, though it may be that his conduct was governed by no higher motive than a wholesome dread of the penalties of the law—he refused, to the huge chagrin of many of the neighbours, to add to his income by the traffic which had helped his widowed mother, the late Madame Delpech, to keep house and land together, her son at school, and a well-filled purse of silver crowns always at hand for an emergency. Madame Delpech, in brief, ostensibly a herbalist, had for many years derived an income, though of no very considerable amount probably, from the practice of a species of charlatanism common in the French rural districts—that of selling to simple rustics, and not unfrequently to as simple-minded town-folk, certain charms, love-powders, vegetable preservatives of various kinds from harm, spiritual or corporeal, and magical compounds wherewith to compel the favour, else despaired of, of some obdurate Jeannette or Jeannot, as the case might be. One of those love-charms, called rose-powder, had, from some accidental coincidence, attained so wide a celebrity as to engage

the attention of the Correctional Police Court of Lyon, a distinction which had the effect of compelling the cheating old beldam to be more discreet and wary in the sale of her magical wares, and more particularly of coloured bean-meal, *alias* rose-powder, at the rate of five francs the half-ounce. This nefarious traffic was, as I have intimated, at all events ostensibly, publicly, repudiated by the retired officer of customs, albeit it was confidently hinted that upon more than one occasion, when tempted by a sufficiently considerable fee, he had violated that wise resolution, and dispensed his mother's nostrums—especially the rose-powder—with the best effect. This, I say, was the common scandal or gossip of a district on the left bank of the Rhône, not far from the city of Lyon, no longer ago than the thirty-seventh year of this enlightened nineteenth century; and I greatly doubt whether a rural commune could be pointed out in all the vast extent of France where a like credulity is not more or less prevalent at this very day. This is a sad, undeniable truism; but it is not from our English glass-house that we can contemptuously cast stones, in scornful reprobation of such hurtful follies, at our neighbours; for superstitions all as gross are to be found in as vigorous vitality in many of the rural districts of Great Britain. Imposture and credulity are unfortunately indigenous to all countries and climes, as well as marvellously self-adaptive to varying exigencies and conditions.

But in stopping to explain or moralise the story

perforce halts also ; and, dismissing for a while Jules Delpech and his visions, schemes, nostrums, I regain its current at the moment of Adrienne Beaudésert's arrival at the Château d'Em, where she was received with every demonstration of regard ; and it really seemed that Madame de Vautpré's heart was touched by the sorrow of the interesting grand-niece, in whose features she discerned, or fancied, a striking resemblance to General Beaudésert, the brother whose memory, spite of the Bresson *mésalliance*, she had always tenderly cherished. The establishment of the château was an extremely well-ordered one ; its disciplinary march perfect in a mechanical point of view ; but it was unfortunate for a girl of Adrienne Beaudésert's temperament and tendencies that Madame de Vautpré had already reached so far into the vale of life as not only to have lost sight of the busy, practical world in which she had passed her youth and prime of days, but that it no longer lingered in her memory save as a far-off dream of acted vanities ; illusions—excepting always the hallowing verity of high lineage —hurtful, if not sinful to voluntarily dwell upon, because tending to lure her mind from the contemplation, through the dusky glass of polemical dogmatism, of the eternity upon the brink of which she stood. Now, it is quite clear to me, from what I have heard and read of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré, that her ascetic piety was of the sincerest kind, as assuredly her charity—thereby meaning alms-giving—

was liberal and comprehensive ; but the adoption of a profitable piety by dependants not only frequently stops at, but exaggerates the externals of devotion ; and, as might be expected in such a household, most of the persons in attendance upon the heiress, in their anxious affectation of a religious fervour they did not feel, were enthusiastic about forms, attributed supernatural efficacy to beads, if not to the prayers they measured—to the image, though careless or unthoughtful of the prototype. In a mental atmosphere so generated and maintained, it is hardly to be wondered at that the faith in charms, amulets, and the like fantasies, imbibed by Adrienne Beaudésert in her childhood, instead of being rebuked, gathered force and authority from the countenance afforded it by apparently similar religious convictions. Had the Abbé Morlaix, now chaplain to the household, possessed her confidence, his wiser teaching might have dissipated such noxious illusions ; but since that, as she deemed it, heartless, cruel funeral oration, Mademoiselle Beaudésert, despite the abbé's strenuous endeavours to conciliate her goodwill, ceased not to regard him with mingled feelings of aversion and mistrust. Instead of complaining to Madame de Vautpré that the sensitive girl resolutely declined his spiritual guidance, the abbé left it to time to remove her unjust antipathy—but, alas ! time frequently halts in the accomplishment of his errands, and arrives with the healing remedy only to witness the death of the patient.

Thus grew in years, in beauty, in guileless simplicity of heart and mind, Adrienne Beaudésert ; Madame de Vautpré continuing the while towards her the stately courtesy, the regulated, unvarying kindness which she had from the first imposed upon herself. Madame la Baronne never went into society, nor encouraged visitors at the château. Adrienne's education in the accomplishments of music, painting, history, foreign languages, &c., was intrusted to the sisters of an Ursuline convent in the neighbourhood, whither and back she was daily escorted in a carriage ; and the only male persons, except servants and M. Morlaix, with whom she ever held the slightest converse, were Jules Delpech and his son Paul, one or other of whom she was pretty sure to meet whenever she ventured—never without a watchful attendant—beyond the château grounds. They had always a very respectful, yet, as it were, kindly familiar greeting for her ; and handsome Paul—it was impossible that Mademoiselle Beaudésert, slightly impressionable as she was in that direction, could help remarking that he was a very handsome young fellow—had often a fresh bouquet to present, whatever was the season of the year. These *rencontres* do not appear to have been reported to Madame de Vautpré or the Abbé Morlaix, or what they might, and justly, have deemed the impertinent audacity of the Delpechs would, there can be little doubt, have been summarily repressed.

But it was not such love as that with which Paul Delpech had the vanity to believe he had inspired the girl-heiress, that, by the time she touched upon her sixteenth birthday, had banished every tinge of colour from the drooping maiden's cheek, light from her eyes, wasted her finely rounded form, and still burned in her veins with the fever of a consuming passion. Adrienne Beaudésert, child or girl of exquisite sensibility, was, be it remembered, morally isolated in her relative's magnificent abode, with no one to love, and beloved by none; the aching void thus created becoming, with every passing day, more completely monopolised, filled to bursting by the imaged memories of her mother and sister; of that tender mother, that sweet sister, who so fully reciprocated her gushing, passionate love, but whom she was only permitted to see once in each dreary year, and in the constraining presence of Madame la Baronne; to correspond with only at stated intervals, and under the same chilling supervision. Adrienne's heart beat wildly, rebelliously, against those cruel, unnatural restraints; and who at all conversant with poor human nature will feel surprise that, finding her aunt inexorable, callous, deaf to her tears, entreaties, prayers, the indignant girl began to listen with kindling eyes and glowing cheeks to remarks upon Madame de Vautpré's fast-failing health, hating herself the while, as she afterwards declared, for the involuntary feeling revealed in those keenly marked, tell-tale signs; that in

moments of great irritation, words of the like significance, eagerly caught up, repeated, exaggerated, distorted, escaped her lips; or that, after a last, supreme effort, preceded by sets of prayers, gone through as if they were so many incantations—votive garlands, suspended upon statues of the Virgin and saints—to shake Madame de Vautpré's fixed resolve, had failed, the girl with much less excuse, because with more deliberation, poured forth her passionate feelings to her mother in writing? This letter she thought to have sent off surreptitiously, but the treachery of the servant to whom it was intrusted placed in the hands of M. Morlaix—all the griefs, resentments, hopes, and anticipations by which her mind was distracted! The abbé was profoundly disturbed upon reading the intercepted letter, and, immediately sending for Mademoiselle Beaudésert, sternly upbraided her with the black ingratitude displayed in the sinful effusion she had dared to pen; dwelt especially upon the heinous crime of but *imagining* the death of her kind relative and benefactress; concluding with a solemn warning that one of God's heaviest judgments was to curse the wicked with the fulfilment of their own evil wishes.

Adrienne Beaudésert was rebuked, humbled, terrified—but not softened or subdued, as she would have been to tears of deepest contrition, had but a few words of kindness or compassion mingled with the abbé's stern homily. The strong consciousness that,

whatever seeming colour or justification her wild, hasty expressions might give to the abbé's injurious denunciations, her heart had never for one moment harboured the dreadful thoughts to which those denunciations pointed, helped to sustain her yielding, flexible nature during the terrible interview; and not till, escaped to the privacy of her own chamber, did she sink upon the floor, crushed, convulsed by the rending agony of humiliated pride, degrading accusation, and bitter self-reproach.

No doubt, too, she felt, as the tumult of conflicting passions calmed somewhat, that M. Morlaix would deem it his duty to place the letter, blackened with his own comments, before Madame Vautpré; and then farewell for ever to the visions of the future independence and grandeur in which she had, it seemed, not thoughtlessly only, but wickedly indulged. Not that Adrienne Beaudésert, child-thoughted girl, valued present or prospective splendour very highly, but her mother did—as we, remembering how impatiently Madame Beaudésert bore the evanishment of her own dream of youthful grandeur, can easily believe—and at her yearly visits talked privately of little else than the coming, though it might be distant time, which was to compensate a thousandfold for the bitter past, the halting, unsatisfactory present. Here was a new grief, but, as it proved, an imaginary one only; as the abbé, whether wisely or not the sequel will show, did not communicate or mention the contents of the letter

to Madame Vautpré. During these painful passages in Mademoiselle Beaudésert's girl-life, and indeed almost from the first day of her domiciliation at the Château d'Em, Jules Delpech had contrived to keep himself acquainted with all that passed there, and, with the blind infatuation of a foregone conclusion, persisted in persuading himself, or trying to do so, that the change in Adrienne's personal appearance, her reported fits of moody melancholy, were solely attributable to a growing and invincible attachment to his son—an attachment that would perhaps be openly avowed when the tomb closed over Madame de Vautpré—an event which, he believed, would not be long waited for. Nor was this sinister belief or trust unfounded.

The elasticity of hope is in youth rarely completely crushed ; and before many days had gone by Adrienne's brain was again busy with expedients for bringing about the family reconciliation upon which her mind was set with such morbid intensity ; and all the more eagerly, that the third annual visit of her relatives was close at hand. But, the resources of tears, supplications, incantations, votive-offerings, having failed, what other device remained likely to insure a fortunate result ? Mademoiselle Beaudésert was thus anxiously ruminating, when Lisette Meudon, a favourite and shrewd attendant, took occasion, whilst perfecting the transparent-thoughted young lady's dinner-toilet, to remark, with reference to a wedding soon to take place among the château servants, how extraordinary it was that

ce gros vieux Bonsard should have won so easily the affections of young and pretty Fanchette Lenoir, who was, moreover, quite as well, if not better off, than he. "Certainly," she added with emphasis, "such a match could not have been brought about without the help of the rose-powder, or similar magic compound."

"Rose-powder!" murmured Adrienne, turning her unquiet, dreamy eyes upon the attendant; "I have heard that spoken of before. What are its real or supposititious virtues?"

"I can assure mademoiselle," replied Lisette, "that there is no supposition in the case. The rose-powder is well known to possess extraordinary virtues, though I should not like Madame de Vautpré or the Abbé Morlaix, both of whom have unreasonable prejudices upon such matters, to hear me say so. For example, there was Marie Deveulle, a widow with a strong cast in her eyes, four small children, and not a liard's worth of property, who married, about a fortnight after she was seen to pay a slight visit to the late Madame Delpech, Jean Lucas, a good-looking young farmer, and one of the most prosperous in the commune. It must be admitted that nothing short of very marvellous magic could have accomplished such a marriage as that. For my part," added Lisette, "I should feel no scruple, if an opportunity occurred—But I am fatiguing mademoiselle."

"Not at all, Lisette; you interest me, on the contrary. How is this precious rose-powder administered?"

"Nothing more simple, mademoiselle. The prescribed quantity is placed in a glass of wine, a cup of coffee—no matter what. The wine or coffee is then handed—let us, by way of illustration, suppose—to Jean Lucas by Marie Deveulle, she looking her *futur* smilingly in the face all the while; he drinks, and the affair is finished. Certainly, there can be no such great harm in all that, even if everybody, with the exception of Madame la Baronne and Monsieur Morlaix, deceive themselves as to the wonderful powers of the rose-powder."

"No harm, as you say, Lisette, if no good. And is it not said to be equally efficacious in reconciling enmities—between, for example, estranged relatives?"

"O yes, mademoiselle; I could tell you of several such instances—of one particularly, where"—

Lisette's instances were cut short by the last summons of the dinner-bell. But the interesting colloquy was renewed the next day, when the wily confidante succeeded, if not in persuading Mademoiselle Beaudésert into an absolute belief in the miraculotis properties of the rose-powder, to at least consult Delpech *père* upon the subject. "My father's friend," thought Adrienne, "who will be sure to deal frankly with me. My grandmamma," she added aloud, "had great faith in such charms. Still, I can hardly—— But, as you say, Lisette, there can be no possible harm in making the trial;" and, her scruples thus silenced, the rash girl sat down to write a note appointing a private interview with Delpech on the morrow, at a place

indicated by Lisette, and not very distant from the château.

"*Paul* Delpech, mademoiselle," hastily interposed the waiting-woman, as her unsuspecting mistress was about to address the note.

"Yes, certainly. I had it in my head, as I told you, that Paul was the son's name; but of course you know. You will keep this, perhaps foolish, matter profoundly secret," she added, as Lisette was leaving the room.

"Secret as the grave," replied the young woman quickly, and with averted face, lest Adrienne should see the triumph flashing there. "Delpech himself shall not suspect that I am aware of the contents of this note; mademoiselle may fully rely upon me."

"Here is the *assignation*, monsieur," said Lisette Meudon about an hour afterwards, addressing Jules Delpech. "You turn pale, and tremble very much," she presently added. "There is, I hope, nothing more meant by this frolic than what I know of?"

"Nothing—nothing, Lisette," replied Delpech, fumbling in his purse with shaking fingers for some gold pieces, and placing them in her ready palm. "And when the wedding takes place, yours with Claude Simonet—if a fat dowry can win the old man's consent—will not be far off."

"That is well understood, Monsieur Delpech. But tell me why," added the young woman, still under the influence of a suddenly awakened feeling of distrust,

"if you are so positive Mademoiselle Beaudésert has a decided *penchant* for your handsome son, are you so anxious to compromise her by these pretended assignations? As to the rose-powder pretence, that, excuse me, is as absurd as the faith of the credulous fools about here in its wonder-working powers."

"You err, Lisette," replied Delpech. "If Mademoiselle Beaudésert once partakes of some wine tinctured with rose-powder, in Paul's presence, I shall have no fear that the wedding will be long delayed after Madame la Baronne has taken her place in the vaults of the Church of the Assumption."

"That may be, Monsieur Delpech; but you know Mademoiselle Beaudésert will never do anything of the kind, just as well as I do that you dare not propose it to her. I have no misgivings upon that point. Mademoiselle is as sensitive and proud as she is pure and simple-hearted. Still," added Lisette, one of that numerous class of persons whose aid in evil purposes may, for a sufficiently tempting reward, be counted upon to a certain extent, but no further—"still it occurs to me, that if you really are so confident"—

"I will be frank with you, Lisette Meudon," interrupted Delpech, swallowing the rage he felt at the woman's persistence. "I saw Madame la Baronne a few days since: she is going fast; Mademoiselle Beaudésert will soon and suddenly find herself in a dazzling position, which now she can have no just idea of.

Her mother, a woman of the world, will be with her—parasites, flatterers, suitors innumerable will crowd about her. All this may turn her head. It is prudent, therefore, to strengthen Paul's hold upon her fancy by these little compromising arts, which, when one is prompted by a laudable ambition, are, you **will** agree, perfectly permissible."

"Perhaps. However, I do not see that any **great** harm can accrue. The marriage-portion," added Lisette, opening and holding the door in her hand—"the marriage-portion, Monsieur Delpech will do well to remember, should he succeed in his audacious project, must be a liberal one, and legally secured *before* the grand wedding takes place."

"Precisely, *ma fille*. Paul and myself, moreover, will owe you a large debt of gratitude for your services and silence."

"*Chut, chut!* I look to be rewarded by money, not moonshine, Monsieur Delpech."

"Claude Simonet," said Jules Delpech with a wry grimace, meant for a complimentary smile—"Claude Simonet won't be the father of fools, if his children take after his pretty wife."

"He won't, in that case, be the father of *dupes*," was the retort; "a fact which, I repeat, the Delpuchs, father and son, will do well to bear in mind. *Bonjour, monsieur.*"

"*Au plaisir, Mademoiselle Meudon,*" responded Jules Delpech, adding with a savage snap of his teeth

as the door closed: "The insolent hussy! I should like, instead of a dowry, to accommodate her with a" — *What*, he did not say; but one might have sworn from his looks it was something which Lisette Meudon would have decidedly demurred to as the substitute for a handsome marriage-portion.

The child-heart of Adrienne Beaudésert beat violently, and a vague feeling of terror so oppressed her, upon approaching the appointed rendezvous on the following day, that she was upon the point of turning back and abandoning her purpose. "It was the last effort," she afterwards said, "of my guardian angel to draw me back from the precipice to which I was madly hastening. It was made in vain. I shook off the warning impulse, bade the valet remain where he was for a few minutes, and hastened on."

Jules Delpech would have made a capital actor, if one might judge by his natural assumption of surprise and deferential interest as Mademoiselle Beaudésert, blushing and painfully agitated, stood before him. It was some time before he appeared able to even dimly make out her meaning from the confused, hurried sentences in which it was expressed. At last he seemed to catch it, but still uncertainly.

"Mademoiselle Beaudésert wishes to know of me if there is any truth in the reported marvels effected by the rose-powder. Do I rightly comprehend her?"

"Yes, that is the question I wish to put; and if—if; but perhaps it is all an idle tale?"

"It is *not* an idle tale," replied Delpech, with well-sembled gravity and earnestness. "The miraculous properties of the rose-powder have been proved over and over again ; but mademoiselle is perhaps not aware that to dispense it is to act in contravention of the law, though not of morality ?"

"Oh no, I had not thought of that ; and I would not for the world that"—

"If mademoiselle," interrupted Delpech, "will tell me frankly for what purpose she requires the rose-powder, the wish to serve a daughter of the noble-minded victim who once honoured me with the name of friend, will, if I see a probability of doing so effectively, render me indifferent to any legal penalties I may incur."

"Ah, monsieur," said Adrienne, her soft eyes filling with tears at the allusion to her father, "it is because you were *his* friend that I wished to consult you, knowing that I should not be either deceived or exposed to ridicule. I have a fancy to try the effect of rose-powder upon—upon Madame de Vautpré."

"Madame de Vautpré !" ejaculated Jules Delpech, in a tone and with a start that would not have disgraced Talma—"Madame de Vautpré ! For what purpose, in the name of Heaven ?"

Adrienne explained ; Jules Delpech the while, as she subsequently recalled to mind, though too agitated and confused at the moment to appreciate its strange significance—Jules Delpech, I say, gazing the while into her eyes with a piercing intensity, as if more

desirous of reading there the secret of her soul than of listening to the words of her mouth.

"I understand you, Mademoiselle Beaudésert," said Dulpech, with slow, stage-solemnity of speech. "The rose-powder *will* effect your purpose in giving it to Madame de Vautpré."

"Seriously, I am so glad; for do you know, Monsieur Delpech, I felt almost sure that you would say it was a childish, absurd illusion."

"When shall I place it in mademoiselle's hands?" inquired Delpech.

"To-morrow, if you please, at this place and hour."

"Be it so, mademoiselle: I will be punctual and silent."

"Almost a woman, and a charming one too in person," muttered Delpech, looking after Mademoiselle Beaudésert as she hurried back to where she had left the valet—"in mind, the veriest child! The amiable Ursulines may prepare their pupils very well for heaven, but certainly they do not succeed in fitting them to deal with this wicked world. After all, Paul will make her an excellent husband; and if, which is quite possible, we have deceived ourselves as to the young lady's partiality for him, or at least that it is so decided as to induce her to stoop to a union with him from the height whereon a very few days, or I err greatly, will see her placed, it will require the iron link which I have so successfully begun to forge, to coerce and bind her prideful will. As yet, at all

events, I can say *beau jeu, bien joué*; and, best of all, should our audacious project, as it may be truly called, fail, neither Paul nor I shall be seriously compromised, as I will manage; but it will not, *cannot* fail."

Madame Beaudésert and her daughter Clarisse had passed the stipulated number of hours at the Château d'Em, and were seated at breakfast with Madame de Vautpré, M. Morlaix, and Adrienne; which repast concluded, the two visitors would be conveyed, in a carriage already in waiting, to the *Messageries Royales*, Lyon, *en route* for Clichy. M. Morlaix could not help remarking that Adrienne was very much more restless, perturbed, ill at ease, than on the like former occasions. And why were the burning eyes of the pale, agitated girl turned with such intense, sudden scrutiny upon Madame de Vautpré's countenance when Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert handed chocolate to that lady? Was it that Adrienne's solicitude was awakened by the signs of recent and severe suffering visible there?—for Madame de Vautpré had passed a much worse night than usual, and at her own request had received the sacrament soon after rising.

The abbé would fain have believed so, but could not, knowing what he did. It was rather, he greatly feared, that that young, and, as he once thought, guileless, unworldly heart, was agitated by criminal hopes, which those signs of probably mortal disease had quickened and inflamed.

A harsh but perhaps not unnatural judgment! Poor

Adrienne's criminal hopes were, in sooth, limited to the magical effect produced by the rose-powder. Certainly, Madame de Vautpré's demeanour was more gracious towards her mother and sister than on former occasions ; and, un hoped-for condescension ! suffering and feeble as she was, Madame la Baronne would accompany them down the grand stairs to the entrance-hall ; had shaken hands with Madame Beaudésert, and was about apparently to embrace Clarisse, when she suddenly staggered, caught wildly at vacancy, and fell heavily upon the tessellated pavement, before a hand could be stretched forth to save her. A medical gentleman, who had resided for several weeks at the château, was quickly on the spot, and opened a vein ; a few drops of dark blood flowed, and at the end of a few breathless minutes the man of science announced, in a grave whisper, that Madame de Vautpré was dead—dead of apoplexy !

"Apoplexy ! you are certain of apoplexy !" said the abbé, addressing the surgeon, but with his stern glance fixed upon Adrienne's changing countenance, till she, overcome by a rush of contending emotions, lost her senses, and sank with a low moaning cry into her mother's arms.

Towards evening on the same day, and whilst Adrienne was still in a manner stunned by the suddenness and magnitude of the event which had changed the aspect of her life, she received a message from the

Abbé Morlaix, requesting to see her immediately, and alone. She obeyed the summons, and divined its meaning the moment she was in the abbé's presence. He wore his priest's stole; and a velvet cushion had been placed beside his chair. "I have sent for you, Adrienne Beaudésert," said he, "on this day in which He in whose hands are the issues of life and death has visited this house with such sudden judgment, in the hope, the confidence, that at such a solemn moment you will not refuse or delay to lay bare your whole heart to God."

The abbé's words and tone wounded the susceptibility of the young girl, who, with the *hauteur* inspired by conscious purity and innocence, answered that she had no present intention of placing herself under Monsieur l'Abbé Morlaix's spiritual superintendence. The abbé was enraged beyond all bounds by such a reply, and, in the first movement of his anger, gave partial vent to the dreadful suspicions that had arisen in his mind. Mademoiselle Beaudésert only appeared to comprehend in his angry, menacing language and reproach, that she rejoiced at the death of Madame de Vautpré; and even that was too much for her shaken strength; and again losing consciousness, as in the morning, she would have fallen on the floor, but for the dismayed and bewildered abbé. Directly assistance came, M. Morlaix left the room, and soon afterwards the château, to seek counsel as to what course, under the circumstances, he was bound to pursue.

Whatever that counsel may have been remained unknown to those whom it must have chiefly concerned, since it was not, visibly at least, developed in action. The routine of the château went on as usual; and, on the appointed day, the corpse of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré was borne in state to the vaults of the Church of the Assumption, to be laid by the side of that of her nephew. The funeral display was yet more splendid—the catafalque more gorgeously emblematic of the dignity that lay rotting beneath its imposing upholstery, the crowd more dense, the oration more effective than on the former occasion; albeit the essentials of the show were identically the same in both cases: the same catafalque, only more splendidly bedizèned; the same crowd, in larger numbers; the same oration from the same text, “Whoso breaketh a hedge, a serpent shall bite him;” skilfully amplified to include certain special admonitions, which found their way to at least one conscience, if it might be fairly so inferred from the convulsive sobbing of, ostensibly, the chief mourner amongst that throng of seeming mourners! The spectators whispered to each other that Mademoiselle Beaudésert was more violently affected than at her father’s funeral; and some others of the more observing sort noticed that Jules Delpech, present with his son Paul, was again recognised by Madame de Vautpré’s grand-niece, as she left the church; but this time with a start, shudder, a crimson suffusion of face and neck, rendered more striking by

the instantly recurring paleness. What might that mean, coupled with the flashing looks interchanged by the father and son? A question that which Adrienne Beaudésert herself could not have answered, had she chosen to do so, except by saying, that, since the death of Madame de Vautpré, immediately after drinking the chocolate in which rose-powder had been mixed, the idea of the men who had provided her with the unholy drug—it was Paul Delpech who was in waiting for her with the sealed packet at the second interview, Mademoiselle Beaudésert being accompanied by Lisette Meudon—had been associated in her mind with images of death and sin! Lisette Meudon could have given a more plausible solution of the seeming mystery—namely, the conflict in mademoiselle's mind of pride and high station, with the suggestions of a romantic attachment to handsome Paul Delpech; and Lisette, a young woman of strong feeling, though lax in principle, would not have hesitated to give up the money recompense she was to receive of the Delpechs, were not her marriage with the amiable son of miserly old Simonet dependent thereon, if she might thereby have assisted in breaking the ignoble fetters in which a vagrant fancy, helped by cunning arts, had bound her gentle-minded mistress. But, alas! Lisette Meudon, keen and wary as she deemed herself, had been as fatally duped by those cunning arts as Adrienne Beaudésert herself. So at least confidently calculated the two Delpechs.

The death-rites duly celebrated, the affairs of life regained regard and prominence; and it was found that the large possessions of Madame la Baronne de Vautpré were secured to Adrienne Beaudésert, clogged by one condition only, that whosoever she married was to assume the name of Beaudésert; and it was also provided that during Adrienne's minority Cardinal Retz and the Abbé Morlaix were to have a certain control over her expenditure—M. Morlaix to reside of right during that period at the Château d'Em, and to receive for life the same *honoraires* as had been paid him by the testatrix. The instruments by which the property was thus devolved had been executed only about three months previously.

The brilliant future that had so long eluded the grasp and mocked the hopes of Madame Beaudésert was at last more than realised, to her exuberant delight, unbounded exultation; and it was not very long before the dark, fitful fancies that haunted the imagination of mademoiselle, her daughter, were chased away, or superseded by the excitement attendant upon the novel and dazzling position to which Madame la Baronne's death had raised her. The Abbé Morlaix, who kept himself very secluded, rarely interfered with the management of affairs; and Adrienne, with her prouder, more elated mother and sister, seemed never weary in realising to themselves, in a thousand ways, the intoxicating possession of riches, power, social supremacy. It was the acted

fable, so far, of *the beggar on horseback*, with the catastrophe of the dizzying ride to come.

After three months' enjoyment of home splendours, however, *ennui* began to arise, and a lengthened tour was projected by the ladies, through Switzerland and Italy.

During those three months, the Delpechs had made no demonstration whatever. The father's timidity of temperament had operated to suspend the blow, the possible recoil of which might bring about his own destruction. *Might*—yes; but not if his brain retained its mastering, guiding power. After all, nothing *could* be wanting to insure success, but *l'audace, et encore de l'audace*.

“*Sacre bleu*—yes; we know that very well,” sullenly exclaimed Paul, who had heard that soliloquy, or one very like it, a hundred times before; “but when the moment of action arrives, your heart is to be found in your shoes, if anywhere. It was worth while, truly, to venture so far, only to stop short when the prize was in sight—within hand-clutch, as you well know! Not long to remain so,” added the young man bitterly, “for it is quite certain the Beaudéserts leave France for one, perhaps two years; but whether one or two mademoiselle will not return, we may fully assure ourselves, says Lisette Meudon—the confiding simpleton she is, or, more correctly, has been.”

“You have seen Lisette Meudon?”

“I *have* seen Lisette Meudon, who, through me,

returns the three Napoleons you once *lent* her, with her compliments, and a polite intimation that, for the future, she must decline the honour of our acquaintance."

"The insolent baggage!"

"That polite and peremptory intimation," continued Paul, "did not prevent her from condoling with me upon the sad blight to my hopes caused by the discovery that Mademoiselle Beaudésert cares no more for my fascinating self than for any other of the country clods upon which the light of her countenance may have occasionally fallen."

"And what, pray, may be the meaning of all that insolence?"

"The meaning is plain enough: la demoiselle Meudon, thanks to the powerful interposition of her mistress, will be Madame Claude Simonet in a day or two; elevated, therefore, above our position in life—and, *cent diables!* that is true, too," added Paul Delpech, with an explosion of savage temper.

"True! Surely, Paul"—

"True—yes, certainly it is true," interrupted the son, with a heat inflamed by the liquor he had been drinking, "but it shall not be for long. Hear, now, my unalterable resolve, if you please, sir. Having striven so far, having sunk so deep, I at least will not hesitate at the final leap or plunge; and, since you will not evoke the power you have acquired over Adrienne Beaudésert, I will do so myself; and but a

few hours shall have passed before that young lady is made to thoroughly understand that the sole choice left her is between marriage with Paul Delpech, and public exposure, followed by shameful death ! ”

“ You will fail, Paul—utterly fail,” trembled from the ashen lips of Jules Delpech. “ I—I, since you are so resolved, will set about the—the business at once—by letter first—obscure, preparatory hints, awaking preludes to the else overwhelming thunderburst. Don’t you think it will be best so, Paul ? ”

“ As you please ; only, if possible, get rid of your coward fears. A bold, determined throw *must* win ; but a shaking hand will lose both fortune and fair lady, skilfully as the dice have been loaded.”

Thus urged, Jules Delpech managed to screw his courage to the sticking-place ; and Mademoiselle Beaudésert, whilst busied with preparations for the impending journey, was surprised and startled at receiving several brief notes—not disrespectfully phrased, but indirectly menacing in tone, subscribed D. “ D ! ” thought Adrienne—a child disporting itself in a parterre of gorgeous flowers, from amidst which a serpent suddenly uprears its flaming crest, delaying only to strike—“ D ! that must mean Delpech. What can *he* require of me ? What shall I do ? ”

It was difficult to say. Lisette was unfortunately absent—just set off upon a wedding-trip to her relatives in Paris ; and after considerable hesitation, arising from an unacknowledged dread lest the vague, shadowy

terrors which the letters had excited in her own mind should, were those letters submitted to the clearer, stronger vision of others, assume tangible shape and substance, Adrienne Beaudésert determined upon shewing them to her mother and sister.

"How absurdly nervous you are, Adrienne," said Madame Beaudésert, after running them over. "The man of whom you, silly goose, obtained that precious rose-powder wants to be handsomely paid for his nostrum, but, from a wholesome dread of the law, does not choose to distinctly specify the nature of his demand. *Voilà tout, chère fille.*"

"I hope so," said Adrienne, only partly reassured; "and yet, would that Lisette were here; she should go and conclude the affair at once." Madame Beaudésert remarked that Lisette would be back again in quite sufficient time to attend to such a bagatelle, and changed the conversation to other topics.

Not, unhappy maiden, not to be so concluded even by clever and zealous Lisette, as the following note, received the next day, too plainly showed: "Mademoiselle Beaudésert, I have already sent you three letters, which, though only signed by the initial letter of my surname, must have been perfectly intelligible to you, requesting an interview at an address enclosed. Has the elevation to which mademoiselle has been so suddenly raised, *precisely eight days after her interesting conference with me, seven after that with my son,* turned her brain, blinding her to the fatal conse-

quences of a refusal to reward, in the only manner reward is possible, the love, the devotion—at what cost evinced Mademoiselle Beaudésert too well knows—of that son? I demand, then, for the last time, a strictly private interview with Mademoiselle Beaudésert, to take place within the next twenty-four hours.—JULES DELPECH.”

“ What, *maman*—what mean those wild looks, this pale face? ” gasped Adrienne, as her mother, having glanced over the letter, stood transfixed as by the stroke of a dagger. “ Speak, or I ”—

“ My child—my precious, innocent child,” interrupted the mother, clasping, straining Adrienne in her embrace, with terrified, convulsive tenderness; “ I see it, understand it all now. The villain of whom you had the—the rose-powder, means, O God!—means to assert that you—you, beloved Adrienne—you, sweet, sinless child—knowingly obtained—obtained, under the pretence of rose-powder, a drug of him to—to—O Father in heaven, can such things be? ”

“ What things? ” exclaimed Clarisse. “ Speak, mother. You are killing Adrienne.”

“ That—that Adrienne obtained a drug of him—to—to shorten the life of Madame de Vautpré.”

With those words, the flame-crested serpent leaped at Adrienne’s throat, and life for a time forsook her. It was long before the distracted mother and sister could recall her to consciousness, and to what consciousness, when successful? What else but this,

that she, Adrienne Beaudésert, was the murderer of her relative and benefactress—in fact, though not, blessed be God, in purpose—that she held her life and (minor, but still bitter consequence) the splendid position which had so lifted her up with pride, at the mercy of a miscreant whose forbearance could only be purchased, it seemed, by the abhorred pollution of a marriage. But no ; she would die a thousand deaths first !

For all this, however, before the expiration of the stipulated twenty-four hours, a message reached Delpech to the effect that Mademoiselle Beaudésert wished to see him early in the forenoon of the morrow at the Château d'Em.

The hoary-headed conspirator did not fail to attend at the time appointed, sprucely attired, and prepared with a number of carefully conned phrases in depreciation of the outburst of wrathful terror with which he expected to be assailed if the young lady or her mother had fathomed, and he could hardly believe they had *not* fathomed, the true purport of his menacing letters. “But, the first flash of the tempest over,” argued Jules Delpech, “the stern necessity of the”—

The current of his thoughts was checked, and he himself staggered back in dismay from before the apparition, as it were, of Adrienne Beaudésert, who, with her face the colour of the loose white morning robe she wore, her hair in disorder, her eyes flaming

with insane excitement, came swiftly towards him from a door which silently closed after her, grasped his arm, and, whilst perusing his countenance with intensest scrutiny, said, in low, rapid, earnest accents :

“ I have consented to see you, sir, not to defy, to curse you—human maledictions could not reach fiend-nature such as yours—but to say this : your object in inventing the horrible lie!—yes, lie, lie, lie! with which you have sought to stab my life, is, must be, money. Well, confess that it *is* a lie ; give me proof, easy for you, that it is one ; proof that Madame de Vautpré died—as she *did* die—a natural death, and I will secure to you the half of all I possess ! The half did I say ? All, all, will I give in exchange for unstained life—in redemption of my else lost soul ! ”

Adrienne’s voice ceased, not so the fierce inquisition of her eyes ; and Jules Delpech, amazed and shaken by the wild distraction of her speech and aspect, could with difficulty stammer out, in low, husky under-tones, that mademoiselle’s own words betrayed a knowledge complete as his own, though not so much as hinted at in his letters, of—of—the cause of Madame de Vautpré’s death—of what the pretended rose-powder really was.

As these words, slowly distilling from the man’s poison-lips, fell upon Adrienne’s ear, her erect, rigid form seemed to collapse, and, presently tossing her arms distractedly in the air, she turned away with a scream of terror, made as if to flee from Delpech’s

presence, and was received in the embrace of her mother, who, with Clarisse, had been a trembling listener close without the door. Delpech, quite satisfied with his progress so far, now hastened to be gone, first, however, muttering to Madame Beaudésert, that such violence and agitation were absurd, uncalled for, as the profoundest secrecy would of course be observed—at all events, till a definite understanding was arrived at—and that there was not perhaps one great family in all France whose private archives, if brought to light, would not reveal secrets of a similar kind.

Mademoiselle Beaudésert did not leave her bed for many days after this; and Delpech's negotiation with the wretched family at the château—M. Morlaix, as it happened, was fortunately, or unfortunately, absent in Paris—was carried on through her mother. The substantive position of the two parties, the Delpechs and Beaudéserts, was set forth by Jules Delpech at those interviews with a quiet coolness, derived from the poor lady's panic-fears, that looked courageous, bold-faced ruffianism.

Madame Beaudésert has since frequently declared, that, whilst listening to Delpech's atrocious talk, she felt as in the actual presence of a fiend from the bottomless pit, specially commissioned to achieve the perdition, body and soul, of herself and children! Once or twice, indeed, the thought, piercing with momentary light the thick darkness, glanced across her mind, that it was surely impossible a man, how-

ever reckless, who had really committed the dread crime of murder, could speak of it with that calm cynicism, prate so glibly of the awful penalty he by his own showing—if that showing were true—had primarily incurred. But how to act upon that blessed hope? Write to already deeply prejudiced M. Morlaix, entreating his immediate return, and, upon his arrival, take counsel of his judgment, his knowledge of the ways of men, and, all too late, find Delpech's assertions confirmed! Impossible—utterly impossible to incur that tremendous risk—to desperately stake character, life, the innocent life of her child, upon that fearful issue!

Finally, for the suggestions of unreasoning fear prevailed, and Adrienne Beaudésert was at last subdued—terrorised into consenting to a compromise, by which it was settled that the civil and legally binding form of marriage was to be gone through by her and Paul Delpech—the blessing of the Church, unessential to the validity of the contract, she would not ask for such constrained, unnatural vows—immediately after which, and in accordance with the provisions of a solemn instrument subscribed and attested beforehand, the nominal wife and husband were to separate and remain strangers to each other for ever. Adrienne—till such time as arrangements could be made, without attracting too much public attention, for her seclusion for life in a convent—to inhabit with her relatives one wing of the château—the Delpechs

the other; and the disposition of the property was settled by the same document, which Jules Delpech drew up in imposing wordy form. It was formally executed, and the civil marriage, it was agreed, should take place on that day se'nnight.

In the meantime, it had been industriously set about, that the seclusion of Mademoiselle Beaudésert, the anxiety and consternation observable in the demeanour of her mother and sister, were caused by the thwarted but obstinate determination of the young lady to wed one so far beneath her in station as Paul Delpech, with whom, it was asserted, she had all along been upon terms of secret lover-intimacy—one note addressed by her to the young man, appointing a private interview, had been seen by Madame Sabin, a most respectable person, well acquainted with her handwriting; and her impulsive, affectionate recognition of the elder Delpech amidst the crowd in the Church of the Assumption at her father's funeral was cited as corroborative proof, if any were wanting, of the early, deep-rooted attachment which had gained strength and intensity with every day of her life! Scarcely anything else would, one may be sure, be talked of or written about by the gossips in the vicinage of the Château d'Em; and it thus fell out that Madame Claude Simonet, or Lisette, as I may continue to call her, heard, in Paris, of the astounding marriage on the very day the same intelligence reached M. Morlaix; the immediate result being, that Lisette and

her husband and the abbé met a few hours afterwards at the bureau of the Lyon diligence, and were fellow, and exceedingly communicative, passengers during the journey homewards.

Instantly upon reaching the Château d'Em, M. Morlaix demanded an audience of Mademoiselle Beaudésert. It was peremptorily refused, in accordance with an understanding come to with the Delpechs; and the half-demented abbé could only extract from Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert that Adrienne was determined upon the marriage, and would not suffer herself to be importuned upon the subject. M. Morlaix had next recourse to the lawyers, with equally disheartening result—the mother's consent, he was informed, being quite sufficient authorisation of her daughter's marriage, however opposed to it the trustees of the De Vautpré property during Mademoiselle Beaudésert's nonage might be. Lisette was equally, and from the same cause, unsuccessful in her efforts to obtain speech of her former mistress, and much more ferociously enraged thereat. But what to the purpose could be effected even by her sharp eyes and sharper tongue, she not knowing, not being able even to guess at the true motives prompting Mademoiselle Beaudésert's consent to such a marriage? She, however, quickly undeceived good Madame Sabin, wife of the medical gentleman who attended Madame de Vautpré in her last illness, as to the note supposed to have been addressed to Paul Delpech by Adrienne

Beaudésert, confessing with shame and ceaseless iteration, that that was her own scheming handiwork. Lisette, moreover, loudly proclaimed her determination to be present, *plait à Dieu*, at the Hôtel de Ville, and have some conversation with mademoiselle before the abominable ceremony was proceeded with.

The affair wore the same menacing aspect on the afternoon of the day preceding that which was to witness the successful consummation of the Delpech conspiracy. It was the month of September, and growing so dark that Adrienne Beaudésert, still prostrate as well in body as in mind, could no longer read the *accord* that, as already stated, had been drawn up and signed by the contracting parties, and which she had been perusing and reperusing, in order to more completely satisfy herself that its clauses had been so plainly framed that there could be no after-denial of their true purport and meaning. Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert were present; and the latter, more by way of breaking the silence by saying something, than influenced by any serious apprehension, said:—

“I suppose, dear Adrienne, that the condition of immediate separation conceded and subscribed to by those tiger-hearted Delpechs can, if necessary, be legally enforced?”

Lightning seemed to leap at the remark from Adrienne’s darkened heavy eyes, and she glared at Clarisse as if the words had stabbed her. Mastering herself, she turned and hid her face in the pillows of

the couch upon which she was reclining, was soon apparently asleep, and Madame Beaudésert withdrew with Clarisse upon tiptoe. They were no sooner gone, than Adrienne started up, made her way quietly to the library, selected a Lyon directory, made a memorandum with her pencil, and then, ringing the bell, desired the answering servant to have a close carriage in waiting at the back entrance to the château within ten minutes.

“La Rue St. Martin, Numéro 19—do you know it? The residence of M. l’Avocat Dufresne?” said Mademoiselle Beaudésert, in answer to the questioning bow of the coachman, and was immediately driven off.

M. l’Avocat Dufresne’s new and interesting client was so thickly veiled and muffled up that, had she been personally known to him, he would have failed to recognise her, as she placed a heavy fee upon the table, and in a low trembling voice recited the conditions of the signed accord, suppressing the names of course, and asked if such a pre-contract could be enforced against the possible opposition of the husband.

“Certainly not, mademoiselle. An accord stipulating that a husband shall not be a husband, is not worth the ink consumed in writing it out. That is, no doubt, very well known to some, at least, of the parties that have subscribed such a document.”

“Thank you, monsieur; that is all I require to know.”

Adrienne's mind was made up from that moment, nor did she feel the slightest irresolution as to the course she would follow, lead her whithersoever it might; to a shameful death, there could be little doubt, for the baffled Delpechs would in their rage be sure to persist in accusing her of criminal complicity in their dreadful crime; and circumstances would, it was useless to attempt concealing from herself, give colour and coherence to all they said. For all that, she would, and she exulted to think it was still possible to say she would, now do her duty, leaving the result to God."

Adrienne sat up late that night, busily occupied in writing; slept soundly the first time for many days; and, rising with the dawn, sent her packet of papers, Delpech's letters included, to the Abbé Morlaix. The three ladies breakfasted as usual in Adrienne's chamber; and Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert were both struck—shocked, almost, by the cheerfulness visible in the aspect of the supposed bride, on that the hated, dreaded, marriage morning! Little, however, was said, and that little not relating to the matter pressing exclusively upon their minds, till a message was brought, announcing that the Messieurs Delpech were arrived, and waiting in the *grand salon*. It had been arranged, I should state, with the municipal authorities, that, in consideration of Mademoiselle Beaudésert's delicate state of health, the marriage formalities should be gone through at the château,

Madame Beaudésert and Clarisse, white, trembling in every limb with terror and horror, obeyed the implied summons ; Adrienne promising to follow almost immediately. They found the two Delpechs, as stated, in the grand salon, both evidently in a state of great nervous excitement—the father more especially ; and a moment after their own entrance the Abbé Morlaix, with Lisette and her husband, came in from a further door. No sooner did Jules Delpech perceive the last comers, than, surprised out of all self-control, he made for the door by which he had entered, with the apparent purpose of escaping from the place, but found, to his thereby greatly increased consternation, that it was locked on the outside ! “ What can all this mean ? ” gleamed from his flurried eyes, and stood out in large drops upon his forehead, as he again, perforce, fronted the company, now increased by the silent entrance of Adrienne Beaudésert, who, pale, calm, lustrous as Parian marble, took a seat between her agitated mother and sister. It was difficult to interpret the expression of Lisette’s flushed features, but that of the abbé’s naturally stern countenance was unmistakably grave, earnest, solemn.

“ What is the purport of all this dumb show ? ” exclaimed the younger Delpech, assuming with some success a front of defiance. “ Where are the municipal officials ? A priest is not required at these espousals ! ”

“ There will be no espousals,” replied the abbé,

"between you, Paul Delpech, and Adrienne Beaudésert, now or hereafter."

"Ha ! Does, then, Mademoiselle Beaudésert dare—dare, I say, refuse to ratify her promise ? "

"Yes ; she dares refuse—*does* refuse to do so, at the peril, you know, of her life. I know all, and from her."

This announcement elicited cries of terror and dismay from Madame and Clarisse Beaudésert ; Paul Delpech champed a bitter malediction, and his fear-mastered father again distractedly essayed to open the door, close to which he had remained standing. Adrienne alone was calm, unmoved ; but as for Lisette, she was only kept from instant and violent interference by a forbidding gesture from the abbé, and her husband's eager remonstrance : "Doucement—doucement, bonne femme ; thy turn will come presently, never fear ! "

"It appears," resumed M. Morlaix, "from the papers I hold in my hand that you, Jules and Paul Delpech, accuse Adrienne Beaudésert of having obtained of you a poisonous drug named, for the occasion, rose-powder, by which she destroyed the life of her aged relative, Madame de Vautpré. Is that so ? "

"First, Monsieur l'Abbé," exclaimed Paul Delpech, whose natural audacity was sustained by drink, early as it was, "tell us by what right or authority you presume to ask such insolent questions."

"I ask them in order to ascertain, before invoking

justice, whether the horrible tale is or is not an invention."

"We shall say nothing," hastily interposed Delpech senior, forestalling his son's reply. He fancied the abbé was desirous of hushing up the matter after, if possible, relieving Mademoiselle Beaudésert's conscience of the burden that oppressed it. This thought gave him momentary courage.

"Are you aware that the punishment of the galleys awaits those who, for the sake of obtaining money or other advantages, invent and circulate false accusations?"

"*Prove* any accusation we have made to be false," retorted Paul Delpech; "and let me assure you, Monsieur l'Abbé, that you are playing with the life of your fair protégée. We should not, in any case, go to the scaffold alone, take my word for it."

"That is not so certain," replied the abbé, with unmoved sternness. "Your wicked design may have miscarried; in fact, it did miscarry—in proof whereof, I have to inform you that a post-mortem examination, performed, at my instance, within twenty-four hours of death, clearly established the fact, that Madame de Vautpré died from natural causes only."

"A cry, a shout, a scream of women echoed those blessed words: Adrienne was in a moment clinging to the reverend speaker's knees; Madame Beaudésert seemed inclined to cast herself into his arms; Lisette, in a state of intense inflammation, shook her little fists

at the cowering Delpechs, prevented only from transforming her threats into deeds by Claude's fast hold of her skirt, and iterated, "Doucement — doucement, Lisette ; it will be thy turn presently, never fear."

"Calm yourself, my child," said the abbé, as soon as he could make himself heard, and raising Adrienne, "and you, Madame Beaudésert ; the end of this matter is not yet."

Paul Delpech, stunned, overborne for a while, reassumed by a violent effort his previous effrontery, and said in a sneering tone : "Then, monsieur, if your post-mortem examination was skilfully conducted, the rose-powder was but an innocent, harmless powder after all ; have it so, if you will—and now, *mon père*, you and I may as well leave this good company—for a time ! "

"Not so fast, if you please ; your *intention* may, I repeat, have been evil enough—the rose-powder you furnished, a poisonous drug : that is quite another question, upon which Madame Claude Simonet here can throw some light."

"Ha, ha ! cursed rascals !" shouted Claude ; "now look to yourselves."

"*Tais-toi, Claude,*" interrupted Lisette ; "this is what I have to say. For certain reasons I had come to entertain strong suspicions of Messieurs Delpech ; and I said to myself, after receiving, as I did, the packet of rose-powder, nicely sealed up, from Paul

Delpech : ‘Lisette, my girl, thou hast persuaded thy unsuspecting young mistress to have secret dealings with two good-for-nothings—if there are any in France—it behoves thee, therefore, as an honest girl, to see no harm comes of it. Who knows what infernal drug this is which they palm off as rose-powder? Not thou, Lisette; and therefore, to avoid all chance of evil, keep the sealed packet carefully locked up, and when mademoiselle asks thee for the magical rose-powder, give her instead—well, what think you?—some of her own red *dentifrice*.’ Ha, ha! Messieurs les Empoisonneurs, that disarranges your fine plans, does it? And look here, my friends!’ added Lisette, foaming over with exultation—“here is your precious packet, unopened, sealed up, just as you gave it me! and I hope, for your sakes, it will be found enough to poison a thousand horses!”

The exclamations that followed this speech must be left to the imagination, as well as Claude’s obstreperous curvetings and gesticulations.

“There is nothing in the packet,” said the elder Delpech, hoarsely—“nothing but bean-flour. Let us go!”

“That fact must be first ascertained,” replied the abbé, “till which time you cannot leave the château. And now, dear child, and you, my friends, let us retire, and return God thanks for this great deliverance.”

The rose-powder was nothing but coloured bean-

flour; the Delpechs were, nevertheless, prosecuted for the conspiracy, and sentenced to severe punishments. Of the further domestic history of the distinguished French family, resident in the south of France, of which the foregoing narrative supplies a hastily sketched episode, I know nothing except from the French journals, wherein I have read of two marriages, and, I think, five births, but not, as yet, one death, having occurred among the descendants of the Beaudéserts.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 6.—THE WIFE'S SECRET.

WITHIN two hours of the birth of Paul Verdot, his mother died ; and, as her husband had departed this life some six months previously, little Paul was left an orphan almost as soon as he well could be ; and but for his grandame Truquet, manufacturer and vendor of *sabots* in the ancient town of Amiens, in the department of the Somme, France, the little fellow must have been conveyed to the basket of the *enfants-trouvés*, and consigned to the pious care of the good nuns attached to that anti-Malthusian establishment. Kind Dame Truquet, having wrapped her tiny grandson carefully up in her lap, carried him safely home, and by dint of careful nursing, unstinted scolding, and stripes not a few, contrived to bring him creditably up to young man's estate, with only one mishap of any consequence. This occurre^d

one day when Paul was about three years old. Madame Truquet kept a stall in the market-place on Saturday for the more ready disposal of her wares, and, one or two likely-looking customers coming up, as she was dandling Paul affectionately in her arms, she too hastily popped him down on a lofty and loose heap of *sabots* just deposited upon the narrow stall, which, unable to support the sudden and straggling weight, slid over, carrying the child with it, who fell heavily on the pavement and broke his right leg. This unfortunate tumble resulted in permanent lameness, the wounded limb when cured being about two inches shorter than its fellow—a calamity not without its compensating benefit, inasmuch as it rendered Paul for ever ineligible as a candidate for military glory; in other words, deprived him of the honour of contributing a unit to the conscription lists. Nothing otherwise especially noteworthy is recorded of Paul's boyhood. He very early mastered the art and mystery of the *sabot* manufacturing, and at his own request was apprenticed to a *cordonnier*, so that he might thereafter be able to combine the twin trades of wood and leather shoemaking. Paul finished his time at twenty, and, but for a mishap which befel him at that susceptible age, he would at once have set out with a light heart, like other young men of his class, for a two or three years' tour through France to acquire experience in his craft, and such general knowledge of the ways of the world as would qualify him to settle down quietly and comfortably at Amiens,

with "Truquet and Verdot, boot, shoe, and *sabot* manufacturers" over the shop-door. This first stumble, as it may be called, upon the very threshold of life was caused by the bewildering black eyes of Lucille Borlase, a young shoebindress employed by his master, at whose dwelling poor Paul used frequently to call for the work which had been given out to the mischievous damsel, and he was only too happy when occasionally asked to sit down and wait awhile till it was finished. At those times, as Paul subsequently confessed to his indignant grandmother, he felt Lucille's merry glances shoot through and through his heart and back again, just as her bright needle pierced in and out of the less tender binding she was sewing on. This revelation, made on the day his apprenticeship expired, would hardly perhaps then have bubbled over his lips but for the great additional fervency imparted to his passion by the numerous wine-cups he had been draining on taking final leave of his *camarades de boutique*.

"Lucille Borlase!" exclaimed Madame Truquet, with explosive wrath: "why, Paul, you must have lost your senses! The Borlases have been children of the devil time out of mind. The men, sots, idlers, spendthrifts; the women, two-faced, dissembling hussies that would deceive Satan himself, much more a poor gaby like you."

"Come, come," broke in Paul, with great heat, "not such a gaby as you may suppose, *bonne mère*. Besides, a girl isn't always a saint for having been brought up

in a convent; as for Lucille, *parbleu!* she is simplicity and candour itself. One can see it in her looks. O—h!"

The long-drawn sigh with which Paul concluded completely overset the old lady's patience—never too steadily balanced,—and she replied to it in a way not uncommon with her when very angry, by shying a *sabot* she was varnishing at the delinquent's head, accompanied by a volley of expletives not necessary to repeat. Frequent practice enabled her grandson to easily avoid the dangerous missile, and her words went equally astray of their mark after a few moments, as Paul hastened along towards the slandered damsels's residence, and, arrived there, poured forth, with all the energy and distinctness swift speed and ardent affection permitted, the hopes, tribulations, wishes, anxieties, excited in his bosom by the too charming Lucille.

" You do not know, then," replied that much amused baggage, " you do not know, then, my poor *boiteux*, that"—

" *Boiteux!* " echoed Paul, springing indignantly from his knees to the full height of his best leg—" that is true; still if one is a little lame"—

" One may be six feet, up one side," interrupted Lucille, with the same delightful mockery of tone as before. " No doubt; but I would say, if permitted, that you do not know, it seems, that I am betrothed to Jacques Dupré, the mason, who can earn ten francs to your five, my friend, and that we intend marrying next week."

Paul heard no more, or, at least, he would not if he could have helped it ; but the hussy's merry laugh by which he was pursued seemed sounding in his ears even whilst recounting his discomfiture to Madame Truquet. "Console yourself, Paul," said that dame, as she handed her afflicted grandson a spiced night-cap, and tucked him up comfortably in bed—"console yourself, *mon garçon* ; there are prettier faces in Amiens than ever beamed under the cap of Lucille Borlase. Besides, as I told you, they are dissemblers to their very nails : you shall as easily find out their secret meaning as what is hidden under a conjuror's palm. Good night, *mon brave* ; you have had a lucky escape, and it is I, who have known the Borlase family these fifty years, who tell you so."

Paul was very much better the next morning ; the fires of love and liquor had cooled sensibly during the night, and by noon he was sturdily marching along, with his kit strapped to his back, on the road to Paris, determined to bravely face the world spite of all the Lucilles in creation. Paul did not, however, get further on his road to the metropolis than Abbeville, where he found immediate and constant work, and such agreeable associates, that he remained there contentedly something over six years, during which time he contrived to save about eight hundred francs,—the best possible proof that could be given of his general steadiness and sobriety. During that long period he had only paid two or three brief visits to Madame

Truquet ; and all he had heard of Lucille was, that she had married Dupré at the time indicated, and soon afterwards left Amiens with him for Paris. Paul Verdot then had been residing at Abbeville approaching to seven years, when a letter reached him to the effect that his grandmother had been seized with sudden and it was feared mortal illness, and was very desirous of seeing him before she died. He set off at once for Amiens, and arrived there barely in time to close the eyes of his kind and aged relative, and to hear her faintly murmur, in the last words that fluttered on her lips, an injunction “to avoid the revolutionists, and beware of Lucille Dupré, *veuve*.”

The revolutionists ! Yes : Paul comprehended and acceded to that without effort. It was the beginning of the year 1792, under which date are inscribed the bloodiest pages of that frightful history. Amiens, like other towns, had its *Salut Public* and guillotine in vigorous execution, and drunken snatches of the *Carmagnole* and *Ca ira* penetrated to the sick-room, and mingled with the death-sobs of the expiring woman. But Lucille Dupré, *widow* ! He would not conceal from himself that the last word had excited, even at the solemn moment when it was uttered, some score of feverish pulse-beats ; but what of that ! He would, upon reflection, be cool as ice, obdurate as granite, to any advance from that quarter. Lucille had made a fool of him once, long ago, when he was poor and inexperienced, but now that he was rich—

comparatively so, at least (two thousand crowns had been accumulated by Madame Truquet,—not to speak of the business and stock in trade), and, moreover, knew the world, Lucille Dupré, *veuve*, if she entertained any thought, as his deceased relative's words seemed to intimate, of hooking him for her second husband, was miserably mistaken; upon that point, she might depend, he was rock—adamant.

Error, Monsieur Paul Verdot! A young and pretty widow,—and especially a French widow,—aware of how, and where, and when, she once drilled a hole in your susceptible heart, will, if it be worth her while, reopen the old wound in a way that all the defensive armour in the world can avail nothing against. It so fell out. Paul Verdot was standing at his shop door one afternoon, smoking serenely, spite of the hurly-burly of fierce polities raging in all directions, of which he kept himself studiously aloof, when, all in a moment, a pair of eyes that had not their equals in all France, flashed upon him, and a voice which he had never ceased to hear in his dreams, exclaimed, in its softest, sweetest tones, “*Bon jour, citoyen Verdot. Ah! I see you do not remember old acquaintances so well as I do. I'm in want of a nice light pair of sabots, and thought I might as well give you the preference.*”

“Lucille!” exclaimed Paul, letting fall his pipe, and staggering back into his shop, as if struck by a blow. “A thousand pardons!—that is, I mean, Madame Lucille Dupré, *veuve*,” he added, mechanically repeating

a sentence that had seldom been out of his head since Madame Truquet's death, some five months previously.

"*Helas!* yes, monsieur," was the reply; "and for nearly a twelvemonth, now! A light, varnished pair," Lucille added,—a bright smile chasing away the demure expression into which she had momentarily constrained her features, as she seated herself, and extended one of the prettiest feet in Amiens for admeasurement. "Not of that waggoner's size, my dear Paul,"—so far had Lucille Dupré, *veuve*, got already,—"not that waggoner's size! Surely my foot is not such a very monstrous one?"

It's my firm belief that *citoyen* Verdot did not, at that precise moment, know whether he stood upon his head or his heels, or the foot to which he had applied the measuring-stick was six or sixty inches long. Presently, however, he became more composed, the *sabots* were fitted, and the result of the meeting was, that half an hour had barely passed before Paul had once more offered his hand to the Lucille who, in days gone by, had so scornfully rejected it. This occurred in the sitting-room at the rear of the shop, where the young widow had allowed Paul to induce her to take a glass of wine and some cake.

"It's very kind and generous of you," replied Lucille—a real emotion filling her eyes with tears as she spoke; "but you were always kind and generous; and

I hope adversity has somewhat improved me. My past wedded life was not a happy one, Paul; but with you," she added, in a gayer tone, "I think I may venture to hope for"—

We will skip, with the reader's leave, the next two or three minutes, as non-essential to the story,—resuming the conversation when Lucille is readjusting her cap, which had been in some way slightly disordered, and putting on her gloves preparatory to Paul escorting her home. "You will be charmed, Paul," the young widow is saying, as she gives a final finger twist to one of her dark curls, and turns smilingly away from the glass—"you will be charmed with my beautiful and gentle Lucille."

"Your own daughter?" exclaimed Paul, greatly surprised.

Lucille seemed to hesitate, and her face flushed vividly—as Paul afterwards well remembered; but she replied, "Yes—I thought you might have been aware of that?"

"Not I," replied Paul. "But what then! I shall love all that belongs to you, dear Lucille; and we shall be happy, us three, I make no doubt, as people in a fairy tale."

Precisely one week from that day, Paul and Lucille were married; and a very happy, prosperous *ménage* that at Numéro 13, Rue des Capuchins, proved for a considerable time; adversity *had* greatly improved Madame Verdot, than whom a more kind, prudent,

notable, industrious wife, could scarcely be. She was very soon able to manage the business, and guide the house much better than her husband could pretend to do, and everybody said Paul had obtained a jewel of a partner. He thought so himself; the brightest and most precious in the world,—but for one flaw therein, which, in his eyes, gradually overgrew and dimmed its radiance. Lucille was, he felt, a dissembler, in one important particular at least; the child, whom she kept in such rigorous seclusion, always appearing restless and agitated if even he addressed a few words to her! What honest cause could there be for that? His grandmother's warning of the deceptive, impenetrable character of the Borlase family constantly recurred to his mind, spite of himself. Then the child, who appeared to be about six years of age, did not in the slightest degree resemble either of her reputed parents. They had both olive complexions, and dark hair and eyes, whilst the young Lucille was a beautiful blonde, with finely-chiselled patrician features,—“like,” Paul would sometimes passionately murmur—“like the haughty impress of himself with which a proud aristocrat might stamp with shame an honest family.” Worse than all, it came to Paul's knowledge that his wife had received several letters through a private channel, with respect to which she would only, when questioned, say they came from a relative of her daughter's, and did not in the slightest degree concern any one else, certainly not her husband. All this had

an evil effect upon Paul Verdot's habits. He began to frequent much more than he ought to have done a wine-shop near the Pont Neuf, kept by one Bontemps, and this led of course to fresh altercations with his wife. One morning after a late breakfast, during which he had listened in moody silence to his wife's earnest remonstrances upon his growing habits of intemperance, he raised his pale, almost haggard face, from the hands in which it had been buried, and, looking at her with something of sad sternness, said,—“Lucille, when we married, I gave you everything ; I do not mean alone my worldly substance,—though that was considerable, and has been since, as you know, more yours than mine,—I gave you all ;—my heart, my confidence, my every thought was and is open and plain to you. You cannot say the same, Lucille ; and you must know it is the weight of the accursed secret you so jealously guard, that is sinking me in the abyss of low vice which I abhor as much as you do.”

“What accursed secret ? Surely” —

“The child !” cried Paul, starting to his feet, and addressing his wife with passionate and imploring voice and gesture. “Tell me in what way it is connected with you—who the mysterious correspondent of yours is ; let me know the worst, if worst there be. I will bear anything for your sake, beloved Lucille,—even shame,—if you will be but frank and candid with your husband.”

“Shame !” repeated the wife, rallying with the sting

c." the word. "How dare you address such a word to me? I will tell you nothing."

"Then I am a lost man!" exclaimed Paul; and seizing his hat he rushed out of the house, and in a few minutes was seated in the wine-shop. He was still there when evening fell, very early,—for the month was January, and the weather unusually dark and cold,—and had been drinking freely all day, when a message arrived from Madame Verdot, who wished to speak with him without delay. Paul rose sullenly and followed the messenger home. The establishment he found was closed, the work-people dismissed, and his wife dressed as if going out. She was very pale and seemingly excited, but her manner was unusually kind and caressing. "Paul," she said, laying her hand on his arm as he fell into a chair, "I am going out,—I and the child: a *fiacre* is waiting for us at the back gate, and I shall not probably return for several hours." The husband made no reply, and she went on: "I have given Jeannette leave to go home, and I hope therefore you will not go out again. And, Paul," added the wife, kissing his forehead, "I feel I have been much to blame in having any concealments from you, and I promise you that to-morrow you shall know all."

"To-morrow I shall know all, you promise?"

"I do, solemnly. And now good-bye for a while."

She went out, and presently Paul Verdot heard the smack of a whip and the sound of departing wheels

from outside the back-yard entrance. He sat for a considerable time in a sort of confused, dozy dream, but, the fire getting low, he roused himself, raked the embers together, threw on two or three fresh logs, and reseated himself, his wife's promise, as he described it, gradually warming about his heart: "I shall know all to-morrow," he audibly ejaculated, and, as the words passed his lips, his eye fell upon the smouldering fragments of a letter, rendered visible in the far corner of the chimney-place by the renewed fire-light. To start up, seize it, and devour its contents as far as they could be discerned,—for the fire had obliterated all but a few detached sentences,—was the work of a moment. It was signed "Auguste;" and "*chère Lucille*" was implored not to lose a moment in coming with "our child" to Selis, a hamlet about a league from Amiens, on the northern road, and to bring "as much silver money" and "clothes" with her as possible, instant flight being imperative! The accursed words seemed to swim in fire before the frenzied gaze of the unfortunate man, and for a moment he was paralysed by the terrible discovery: for a moment only. "Infernal traitress!" he vociferated; "I know all *to-night*, and may reach you yet." He then bounded up the stairs, found that several bags of *écus*, which he knew were there in the morning, had been taken away, and that most of his wife's clothes were gone. There needed no further confirmation of the letter; and in five minutes Paul Verdot was on the road to Selis—armed.

It was about half-past eleven, according to Bontemps, when Paul Verdot returned to the wine-shop. He was as white as a corpse, and there was a large swelling on his forehead as if he had received a violent blow, or had fallen down and struck himself heavily, which he said was the case. He told Bontemps that his wife would not return till the morning, and as there was nobody at home, not the servant even, he felt so lonely that he wished to sleep at his, Bontemps' house. This was acceded to, and he went to bed at once. Very early in the morning a message came from Madame Verdot, that breakfast was ready, and her husband anxiously waited for. Bontemps delivered the message himself to Paul, who stared whilst he spoke like a man in a dream, but said nothing, got up, dressed himself, and went home.

Paul Verdot, but for the strong shudder which passed over him as he encountered the surprised yet cheerful look of his wife, looked more like a stone image moving by automatic power than a living man. "Sit down, dear Paul," said Lucille, soothingly; "I have good news for thee. Ah! I see how it is," she added; "thou hast seen this piece of a letter which I found on the table. I dropped it last night, I suppose; and it has put wicked thoughts in that jealous pate of thine. Never mind, I am now going to explain everything, and satisfactorily, too, as thou'l find."

"Brandy!" gasped the husband, faintly: "brandy!"

It was given him; and his wife, though apparently much astonished, proceeded: "After all, *ma foi*, the explanation is a very simple one. The child was the daughter of the Comte and Comtesse Auguste de Vervay. They are *prosérifs*, as you know; and the child was confided to me under a solemn promise never to divulge its name to a living soul, for fear of those Paris bloodhounds. The countess has been long confined to her bed with illness, so that they could not till lately leave the concealment they had found to attempt escaping from the country. That peril is now, however, surmounted, and they are, I trust, beyond the reach of their persecutors. The letter was, of course, from the count; the clothes were required for the disguise of the countess, and the silver money was also essential; and see, *mauvaise tête*, here is the exchange I have made," added Lucille, who had a keen eye to the main chance, displaying with great glee several jewels, evidently of great value.

The mental pallor of Paul Verdot's countenance had not been in the slightest degree diminished by his wife's revelation, to which he only faintly replied by saying, "Go on—go on. What more?"

"What more! *Parbleu*, that surely is enough? There is nothing else to say that I know of, except that the Chevalier Meudon, a friend of the count's who has been living *perdu*, not far from the back of our premises, and who has frequently slept in the stable, unknown to you, when apprehensive he was beset,

will, I fear, find it difficult to get off, as the count informed me pursuers had obtained a hint of his hiding-place. I thought it possible he might have found shelter here last night, and that was one reason I sent everybody away, and asked you to stop at home, who, I knew, would never betray a poor hunted fugitive. But, heavens, Paul, what is the matter? Help! help! My God, he is dying!"

He was not dying, but rapidly losing consciousness; which, however, a glass of brandy restored sufficiently to enable him to say, in a husky, rapid voice: "Listen, Lucille, and hear how your accursed secret has destroyed me. I found that fragment of a letter, pursued you to Selis, and could nowhere find you there. I returned, crazed in mind, utterly crazed; for I swallowed brandy at every *cabaret* upon the road. I burst into this room, and reclining upon the *canapé* there saw the figure of a man asleep. In my frenzy I rushed at, grappled with him, and was grappled in return. A fierce terrific conflict ensued. Several times I dashed him on the floor, and at last I received this blow upon the forehead, which rendered me insensible. How long I remained so I know not. The cold air revived me. I got upon my feet, procured a light, and saw that I had killed my antagonist, who was stone dead. It's useless screaming, Lucille. In my horror and distraction, I hit upon the mad expedient of placing the body in a sack, bearing it forth in the dark night, and casting it into the Somme. I did

so, amidst, as I distinctly heard, the mocking laughter of demons—human devils they were not, or I should have been pursued. Ah! all is known, and I am lost!"

The entrance of a sergeant of the communal guard was simultaneous with this last exclamation of Paul Verdot. "Don't be alarmed, my friends," said the sergeant; "I have called upon a slight matter of form, nothing more. But upon my word, *citoyen* Verdot, that was a droll freak last night. There must have been an unusually large number of *petits verres* in that head of yours to have put such a fancy there. Shall I tell?" continued the merry functionary, winking, and jerking his head towards Lucille, as he offered Paul his snuff-box.

"Yes—to be sure," stammered Paul, utterly confounded. "What do you mean?"

"Figurez-vous, *citoyenne*," said the sergeant, blandly addressing Lucille, "this charming husband of yours, who is, however, not a bad fellow, let me admit *par parenthèse*, coming home in such a state, you being absent, as we know, that upon finding, decently laid out upon this *canapé*, the dead body of"—

"Dead body? *Grand Dieu!*"

"Dead body, *parbleu!* that of the *proscrit* Meudon; and as dead, I'll warrant, as Louis Capet; killed by a couple of bullets from the patriotic muskets of two of our armed citizens, who had started the *aristocrat* from his lair; which bullets, however, did not prevent him from

crawling into and striving to conceal himself in your premises, *citoyen* Verdot, as if he knew them well," added the sergeant, with a certain air of menace, not, happily, difficult to mollify. " *Merci, citoyenne*; your health—dam! but this brandy is excellent! Another glass? Well, yes; as you say, the weather is bitterly cold this morning. Well, madame, as I was saying, what does your amiable husband do whilst we are gone to procure means of fetching the corpse, but come in, pop it into a sack, carry it off, and pitch it into the Somme! Did you ever hear of such a droll dog, eh? But, seriously, you will come by-and-by to the Hotel de Ville, *citoyen*, and sign the *procès verbal*, or there may be difficulty in apportioning the reward, which is handsome. Be it so, madame,—I cannot refuse a lady; though really, three glasses, one after the other, is—no matter. Here is our glorious Republic, one and indivisible! And now, my friends, *au revoir.*"

As the door closed, the husband and wife threw themselves with bursting sobs into each other's outstretched arms; and Lucille, as soon as her choking utterance permitted, whispered, brokenly: "Never, never, Paul, shall there be an unshared secret between us."

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 7.—THE IDIOT'S EVIDENCE.

WHOEVER has happened to visit the pleasantly-situated village of Blue Anchor, Bridgewater Bay, Somersetshire, can hardly have failed to notice on its extremity, towards the Quantock Hills, a pretentious sort of cottage *orné* in the Chinese pagoda style, with a round pepper-box-looking structure at the gate-entrance, dignified by the name of “Porter’s Lodge.” This edifice was built by a Mr. Wainwright, of Bethnal-green, London, who having, in the course of half a century of saving industry and single blessedness, scraped together a handsome competency, suddenly determined upon exchanging his business and his bachelorhood for the retirement of Blue Anchor, near which he was born, and marriage with a good-looking widow of less than half his own age, but amply dowered

with five small children. Wedded bliss did not seem to agree with Mr. Wainwright, for, after the achievement of Laburnum Villa left him nothing on earth to do but sip its sweets continually, he, after moping through about six months of restless life, sank with entire resignation, the minister said, to his final rest, leaving Mrs. Wainwright, by a will made in the first week of the honey-month, absolute mistress of some twelve thousand pounds in the Funds, in addition to Laburnum Villa and its appurtenances—of everything, in short, of which he had died seised or possessed. We of Blue Anchor had but brief opportunity of noticing how the widow of her second husband bore her sorrow, one little month only having passed away before she took her departure for London; and a painted board, stuck in the front flower-garden, announced that Laburnum Villa and grounds were to be sold: further particulars obtainable of Mr. Holford, Blue Anchor; pending which ultimate disposal of the property, a neatly - framed card in the lodge window gave notice, that furnished apartments, with attendance, might be obtained by application within.

Mr. Holford was my father, who, having had some slight acquaintance with Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright, had undertaken to keep an eye upon the property, as well as over Joel Barton, the gate-keeper, and Mistress Fanny Denvir, or Bennett — there being, in some persons' opinion, considerable doubt upon this point,— the youthful housekeeper left in charge of the inte-

rior of Laburnum Villa. Joel was a parish boy, having been born, bred, educated—that is, taught to read without much spelling, and to write intelligibly to persons skilled in calligraphical difficulties—in the workhouse. He had but one relation, a decrepid, almost bedridden mother, and, in other respects, was emphatically the child of calamity. In person he was greatly deformed, and his large, coarsely-featured head, squat, as it were, upon his broad shoulders, and protruding back and breast, would have presented an altogether repulsive aspect, but for the fine dark eyes which I have often seen kindle into lustrous expression of sad eloquence when words of kindness or sympathy fell upon his ear. The unfortunate lad's intellect, too, was unsound,—unsettled, I sometimes thought might be the truer description ; and by the boy-rabble of Blue Anchor he was always addressed and spoken of as “ Foolish, or Mad Joey.” The taunts and torments to which he was exposed on account of his mental infirmity ceased at about his fifteenth year, his remarkable strength of arm, ponderosity of fist, and fierce courage, at that age effectually protecting him from overt annoyance. Nevertheless, he did not cease to be spoken of as a half-crazed, sullen, dangerous person, whom, spite of some good qualities, such as honesty, fidelity, truthfulness, it was prudent to, as much as possible, avoid ; and there could be no doubt that the persecution to which he had been so many years exposed had quickened and exasperated whatever

of sinister predisposition was latent in his imperfectly-developed cranium. With the exception of his mother and Fanny Bennett, I was about the only person for whom he ever manifested confidence or respect, from my having been able to render him some trifling services. Fanny's influence over him was of a very different character, and incomprehensible, I believe, to himself, often confusedly wondering, as I was sure he did, why it was that her bright face and gentle voice made his pulse beat, and the dark chambers of his brain lighten with a troubled, half-fearful joy. And the child-beauty herself could at that time have little dreamed that the words and looks of compassionate kindness which she bestowed upon Foolish Joey would thereafter have so marked an effect upon her own destiny; that her own life-experience would furnish a striking illustration of the wisdom of the injunction set forth in her dame-school copy-book:—"Scorn not the afflicted nor the outcast, for they also are God's children."

This Fanny Bennett was another of our village notabilities,—I had almost written calamities,—forasmuch that, at the period of which I am now speaking (1837), it would have been hard to decide which of the two, the house or gate-keeper at Laburnum Villa, had been most unfortunate in the lottery of life. Of very humble parentage—her father was a journeyman market-gardener,—Fanny Bennett was one of those rare wild-flowers scattered here and there over the

bleak wastes of the world, whose fresh, rustic beauty possesses so mighty, if but momentary charm, for men palled with the trained graces,—the cultivated attractions of the lilies and roses which adorn the gorgeous *parterres* of high society. A good girl, too,—guileless, affectionate, and dutiful; and, spite of the inflation of vanity which the constant breath of even village admiration could hardly fail to generate in her young brain, might have kept her feet and the even tenor of her peaceful way, had it not unfortunately chanced that a fashionable lady of Bath—whom it is unnecessary to name,—struck by her appearance and natural elegance of manner, offered to take her into her service as “companion,” educate, and entirely provide for her. The temptation was irresistible, and Fanny, who had just turned her sixteenth year, left Blue Anchor in the great lady’s carriage. The promise of the lady-patroness was so far fulfilled that she was taught so much of superficial accomplishment as might be useful or agreeable to her mistress,—hair-dressing, cheek-painting, embroidery—to play the piano sufficiently well to accompany her own voice in the simple ballads she sang so sweetly, and to read with enough of skilled emphasis to render a novel or a newspaper intelligible to the jaded listener. About three years had thus passed when her mistress died rather suddenly, and the pretty *protégée* found herself provided for to the extent of fifty pounds, and a mourning-ring, to be worn as a memento of the deceased lady’s virtues and munificence.

Thus portioned with rich beauty, vain pretence, and fifty pounds in cash, Fanny Bennett, after a fruitless attempt to procure another situation as "companion," returned to fret away her youth with vexation and disgust amidst the meanness and monotony of her father's poor home and its drudging duties, as she had learned to consider them. Changed in temper, puffed up with pride, impatient of her humble position, the young morning of Fanny Bennett's life seemed already darkened with the prophetic shadow of a sinister catastrophe, if I might believe the pretendedly careless post-scriptum of a letter addressed to me at Bristol—where I was at the time on a visit to a relative—by my father. I had never hinted a serious thought regarding her to him or any one else, but he had long since, notwithstanding, as clearly discerned as he strongly disapproved the feeling towards the beautiful maiden which had seemed to grow with my life in constantly-increasing strength and virility. From my earliest recollection I had dreamt dreams associated with Fanny Bennett, and, my father's intelligence producing a directly contrary effect to what he intended, I invented an excuse for hastening home at once, though with what precise purpose I hardly knew myself. Whatever it might have proved, no opportunity was afforded me of putting it in action, for the very day before I reached Blue Anchor, Fanny Bennett left it in company with a Lieutenant Denvir, a young and dashing gentleman, of attractive exterior,—to be married, the village folk reported, with a sneer and a

titter, at Bath. The stranger, who was passing a few days at Blue Anchor, had chanced to meet her about a fortnight after her return home, and the result just related had ensued. It seemed to have taken nobody by surprise ; neither did her return, after about two years' absence, ill, dejected, her beauty dimmed by grief and disappointment, and accompanied by a young child, her son. She had not, it seemed, lived with her husband, as she persisted in calling Mr. Denvir, for more than six or seven months, since when she had dwelt in obscure lodgings in London, barely supported by occasional remittances from Mr. Denvir. These ceased for some time before her return home, and a letter reached her, purporting to be subscribed by a solicitor, but merely dated London, May 19, 1836, by which she was informed that, "the gentleman" from whom the allowance she had received was derived having died rather suddenly, it would necessarily be discontinued. I wrote, at her father's request, to the War Office, to ascertain the fact of his decease ; and a curt official reply informed me that if I had consulted an army-list I should have seen that no Theodore Denvir held a commission in his Majesty's service. This was decisive, and no further doubt remained of the nature of the villainous artifice to which, aided by her own rash folly, Fanny Bennett had fallen a victim.

Fallen thus low from the imaginary height she had attained, the future of the young wife and mother—there was no doubt, we ascertained, that the ceremony

of marriage had been performed between her and the fellow calling himself Lieutenant Denvir—seemed a dreary, well-nigh hopeless one ; and Mrs. Wainwright, who, whatever her other qualities, had a large share of woman's sympathy and compassion, left her in charge of Laburnum Villa at a fair salary and liberal board-wages ; and Joel, till the final disposal of the property, was confirmed in his office of gate-keeper. Nothing, in connection with the fortunes and misfortunes of Fanny Bennett, or Denvir, came to my knowledge till four or five months subsequent to Mrs. Wainwright's departure. It was a delicious afternoon ; the tide was out, and I had been for some time strolling about on the broad sands of Bridgewater Bay, chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy—the latter flavour, as I remember, strongly predominating,—when Joel Barton, whom I had observed busy about a pleasure-boat, in which he frequently accommodated the lodgers at Laburnum Villa with a row or sail, came rapidly, and with seeming purpose, towards me. His face, as he abruptly stopped and intently reconnoitred my countenance, wore, it struck me, a peculiarly malicious, or, at all events, mocking, as well as its usual indecisive, wavering expression. “I have been, Master Holford,” he began, “shoving the boat out towards low-water mark, so that she may fleet soon after the tide rises ; our housekeeper and Mr. Churston are going out together for a sail ; not for the first time either.”

“Your housekeeper and Mr. Churston !” I tartly re-

joined, vexed that I could not conceal the hot flush which instantly made my ears tingle, my eyes flash, and my cheeks feel like burning coals. "What is that to me?"

Joel laughed, and I was about to make some fierce and therefore foolish reply, when he said, with quick seriousness of tone, "I always go with them, Master Holford—always. Do you know?" he added, peering with his dark, uncertain eyes close into my face—"do you know that only yesterday, when they were out together, the little boy Theodore would have been drowned but for me; Mr. Churston let him fall overboard into the water—by accident, of course, you know—entirely accident," and Joel laughed again with a bitter, mocking hilarity, incomprehensible by me. "I fancy our housekeeper will be married again soon," he presently added, finding I made no answer.

"Married again?" I blurted out; "be duped again, you mean."

"Yes, duped again, that's it, Master Holford; but not quite like as before. Mr. Churston is rich and respectable. Lawyer Page, of Bridgewater, answers for that. And see, Master Holford," he added, with abrupt vehemence, "Foolish Joey, as they call him, will soon be rich and respectable too—look here!"

He extricated, as he was speaking, a canvas bag from his trousers pocket, containing, perhaps, a dozen sovereigns, emptied it into his hand, and contemplated his riches with fierce exultation. "For saving Master

Theodore," he exclaimed, as soon as he could withdraw his fascinated glare from the gold. "Mr. Churston's reward for saving Theodore—ha! ha!—ho! ho!"

Before I could say a word, the restless hunchback started off, and strode away some thirty or forty yards. He then stopped abruptly, paused as if in doubt for a minute, hurried back to where I stood, and said, "Mistress Fanny hates, detests, loathes this man as she might a spotted toad. I never heard her say so; but I know it for all that. I observe many things that wise men don't, foolish as I am."

"What, then, is to induce her to marry him?"

"The fear of poverty, the dread of want, not for herself, but her boy; that she may else live to see him pine for lack of food. The house is sold, and we have had warning to leave."

"Well, Joel," I replied, "I can do nothing in the matter, and it's useless, therefore, to worry ourselves by dwelling upon it. An infernal business, I admit, though not exactly yours or mine."

The wild, erratic intellect of Joel—who, I was convinced, had been drinking, though, to do him justice, this was not an ordinary vice of his—seemed to determinedly steady and concentrate itself as I spoke, and after a slight hesitation he said, "I know you better, Master Holford, than to believe those words come from your heart; and I am almost sure I could trust you; and yet, perhaps, you would not have the courage to—" —

"Courage to do *what*, in the devil's name?"

"This, Master Holford, I know—I am sure of," resumed Joel, with resolute calmness, "that this marriage would never take place if—if her boy were once well out of the way,—if the—child—was—DEAD!"

These words, slowly distilled, as it were, from Joel's lips, and accompanied by his maniacal inquisition of my countenance, seemed to arrest the current of my blood. "Good Heaven!" I, after a while, found breath to exclaim; "what diabolical thought possesses you? You surely would not—— But I see you have been drinking to excess, and hardly know"——

"Drinking!" fiercely interrupted the wayward man—"and what if I have, it doesn't so often happen; and you, who are so sober and wise, not to have seen I was joking; a fool like me would have known I was only making fun. But the boat is fleeting, I see, and I must be off to warn the wife and husband that are to be. Good-bye, Master Holford."

I immediately turned homewards, in about as savage and perplexed a mood as ever I remember to have experienced. Mr. Churston, who, I was aware, had been lodging for several weeks at Laburnum Villa, I had seen once or twice at a distance. He appeared to be a gentlemanly-looking person enough, of, I guessed, about fifty years of age; and if Fanny—if Mistress Denvir chose to throw herself away upon a fellow old enough to be her father, how could I help it? and what right, moreover, had I to feel angry thereat? I, who had never, that I was aware of, given the slightest intima-

tion of—bah ! let her marry Beelzebub if she would—what was it to me ? And that crazed and drunken Joel, what might there be of seriousness in the dark fancies floating in his distempered brain ? Surely he could have no real intention of murdering a child whose life he boasted of having yesterday saved, with the absurd view of removing what he supposed to be Mistress Denvir's inducement to marry Churston ? It could scarcely be, and yet, when, thus soliloquizing, I reached home, I could not refrain from imparting to my father the substance of Joel's ravings. He was chief constable of the district—an honorary office in those days,—and might, I thought, speak to Joel in a tone of authoritative warning. He, however, made very light of the matter ; was quite sure Joel must have been tipsy to have uttered such folly, and was, I saw, not in the least put out by the news of Mistress Denvir's approaching marriage. "About the very best thing she could do," he calmly observed, "and a lucky chance withal ; for," added he, looking steadily over his spectacles at his only son, "what respectable young man, of independent means, would marry Fanny Bennett, or Denvir, or whatever else her legal name may be, after all that has come and gone ?" A brief, enlightening sentence leapt to my lips, and would have passed them, but for a resolute effort ; for what could such a declaration now avail, except to greatly irritate my father ? To avoid temptation I abruptly left the room.

We heard nothing further of the inmates of Labur-

num Villa till the following Sunday evening. The month was September, and the equinoctial gales of autumn had set in with unusual violence, as the howling of the wind round the gables of the houses, and the booming of the tumbling surf in the bay, unmistakably gave token. The storm which had suddenly risen was at its height about eight o'clock, near which time a loud knocking, sharply repeated, at the outer door startled my father and myself from the dozy thoughtfulness induced in us both by the warmth of the fire within and the roaring of the tempest without. The door was answered, and the next minute Joel Barton staggered into the room, his face white as a sheet, his eyes on fire with excitement, and his hair and clothes dripping with sea-water.

"I—I want," he stammered in answer to our mute questioning, "I want somebody—you, Master Holford—to go and break the bad news to—to—to Mistress Denvir."

"Bad news! What news?"

"That little Theodore is drowned."

"Drowned! murdered you mean, wretched villain!" shouted my father, at the same moment rushing up and seizing Joel.

"No, no; drowned, I say," persisted the hunchback. "Let me go, will you? The tiller of the boat," he went on to say, after ridding himself of my father's grasp, and looking the while unquietly at me—"the tiller of the boat in which I had taken him for a sail

snapped when the storm came on, the boat shot up into the wind, and the flapping of the mainsail swept him over. I tried to save him, but could not."

More passed, but suffice it to say, that, spite of his protestations, my father conducted Joel to the cage or temporary lockup-house, and then proceeded to break the terrible tidings at Laburnum Villa. I accompanied him as far as the gate only, for the purpose of delivering the message Joel had charged me with to his mother. She had become so extremely deaf, that I could hardly make her understand that Joel was unexpectedly detained from home that night. "Oh, ah!" she at last muttered. "I understand; but you have nothing for me?" And the bleary eyes of the old woman rested eagerly on my hands, as if she thought I had money for her. "Nothing," I bawled, and came away. My father did not return home till near two o'clock, and had, as I anticipated, passed through a very distressing scene. "I have also had, Charles," he added, "a rather long conversation with Mr. Churston, and it is certain that the death of the boy has broken off the expected marriage. Mr. Churston frankly told me, that upon mature reflection he had made up his mind — deuced suddenly, it is clear, — that the union could hardly fail to be an unhappy one, and that he intends leaving for London early to-morrow. There is something very odd in all this."

"There is, indeed; and Joel shall, as I faithfully

promised him, be informed of that fact as soon as it is light. This terrible business is not yet fathomed, depend upon it."

My father agreed, and went to bed; not, however, to sleep—at least I did not,—and by six o'clock Joel Barton received my message. The reply was an earnest request to see me and my father immediately. We were with him in less than a quarter of an hour, and fairly knocked backwards by a blunt declaration or confession, the instant we entered the place, that he, Joel Barton, had drowned, murdered, little Theodore Denvir, at the instigation of Mr. Churston! "I have only had a small part of the promised reward," added the wretched felon, "which I showed to Master Holford the other day, and now he thinks to throw me over, but he shan't. You don't believe me, perhaps. Well, all I can say, only just examine his papers before be gets away, and if you don't find out *why* he tempted me to commit the dreadful deed, say that I bear false witness!"

We could scarcely believe our ears, but, as Joel suddenly persisted in his statement, it was my father's duty, under the circumstances, to act with decision, and off we presently set towards Laburnum Villa, Joel carefully guarded by two constables. We were but just in time, as a fly was at the door, and Mr. Churston just about to step into it. He started and changed colour at seeing us, but, in reply to my father's request to speak with him privately, answered boldly enough, that

he could not spare the time, as he feared missing the coach already.

"*You must* spare the time, Mr. Churston," was the stern rejoinder. "You are my prisoner."

"Prisoner! God of heaven! And upon what charge?"

"As an accessory before the fact to the murder of Theodore Denvir! Ah! I see that is an intelligible accusation; here, steady yourself by my arm, and let us go into the house."

We all followed, and, as soon as Mr. Churston's effects had been brought into the room, my father fastened the door on the inside. Joel then repeated his previous statement, but avoided, I noticed, during the recital to look Mr. Churston in the face. As he went on, that gentleman seemed to recover his composure, and, when Joel ceased speaking, burst out into a furious vituperation of the accusing witness, whom he very liberally qualified as a lying felon, a slandering lunatic, &c., and at last wound up a fierce and indignant tirade by asking my father what possible *motive* he could have had in compassing the death of the child?"

"That I do not know; but the prisoner, Joel Barton, avers that the examination of your papers will unfold it."

The reviving confidence of Mr. Churston fled at once on hearing this, and he was again deadly pale and trembling in all his limbs. "Who will dare," he gasped, "to meddle with my letters or papers?"

"The nearest magistrate will, be assured; and we had better seek him at once. Come, further parley would be useless."

"One moment, Mr. Holford, one moment!" exclaimed Churston, upon whose white forehead large beads of agony were standing. "Let me reflect: I am as innocent of this horrible charge as yourself. Still, there are circumstances—there are papers—which, unexplained, might suggest—— Yes, I will be frank with you, and state unreservedly the exact position in which I am placed."

"As you please; only remember that all you say may be used against you hereafter."

"Of course,—of course. Well, then, since the truth must out, I am the uncle of Mrs. Denvir's husband. No wonder you exclaim, but hear me out. His name was Churston, not Denvir. He died about six weeks ago only, of a fall from his horse, but he lingered long enough to repent him of his conduct towards his rustic wife, and his last will devises his property, about £800 per annum, to her, till his son by her attain his majority, when it will pass to him, charged with a life-annuity of £200 to his mother. This testament was a terrible blow to me. I am not rich—very far from it, indeed, though I contrive to keep up appearances,—and by an arrangement with Mr. Peacocke, the solicitor, of Furnival's Inn, who drew the will, to the effect that I would seek out the widow and child, I obtained an opportunity of soliciting her in marriage before the

change in her circumstances could be known. The death of the child—of which, by my hopes of salvation, I am wholly innocent—entirely changes my position, as in that case the property was devised to me, charged with the widow's annuity only. This is all the crime of which I have been guilty.”

A knock at the door interrupted him. It was the unhappy mother, who came to ask if any tidings had been heard of her child. She had not, of course, the slightest idea that he had been murdered. Upon my father answering her question in the negative, she sank into a chair, hid the pale beauty of her face in her hands, and sat there sobbing convulsively, and deafly inattentive to what else was said.

“Even if you have told the truth, and all the truth, Mr. Churston,” said my father, in a low voice, “the matter must be judicially sifted, and we had better begin at once.”

“But this will be ruin, Mr. Holford,” returned Mr. Churston in the same tone—“ruin to my character at all events; and this, too, upon the unsupported evidence of a malicious idiot.”

“No, no, not unsupported, Mr. Churston,” replied Joel, with suppressed but evident exultation; “the idiot has evidence to bring forth that cannot be contradicted. Here, Master Holford, cut this button off my coat; now let a constable take that and show it to my mother at the gate, and when it returns we shall see what Mister Churston has to say for himself.”

This was done, and several minutes of wondering, expectant silence passed, broken only by the moanings of the bereaved mother. The footstep of the constable was then heard returning along the gravel path,—and no other sound that I could hear ; but the mysterious instinct of the mother was more keenly appreciative ; for at once the sobbing ceased, and she sprang up in an attitude of intense listening attention, which seemed to become more absorbed and eager with each passing moment. The door was flung open, and a wild rapturous scream, an almost maniacal outburst of maternal joy, was simultaneous with the entrance of her son, the reputedly drowned or murdered Theodore ! ..

My head seemed to spin round like a teetotum, and so I imagine did those of others ; but a glance at Joel's triumphant aspect and uplifted finger, directed towards chap-fallen, discomfited Mr. Churston, with the mocking words which followed, explained the whole mystery : —“I say, Mr. Churston, the idiot has spoiled your wedding for you, and wormed out your secret over the market. Didn't you ever know, sir, or had you forgot, that in the long run the knave is no match even for a fool !”

What thoroughly sane brain could have hit upon and successfully carried through such an audacious ruse ? When we had time to look about us a little calmly, Churston we found had slunk off, and presently Joel, sidling up to me, said in a whisper, as the excited Fanny—the only name I seem to know her by—left

the room with her child, “There’ll be a chance for you yet, Master Holford; and you won’t forget, will you, that kindness may sometimes be repaid even by a poor, half-crazy outcast, such as I am?”

There *was* a chance,—a blessed one, leading to a day of which the joy-bells have never ceased to ring out their music gratulations in one of the happiest homes in all broad England.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 8.—THE MERIVALE FAMILY.

THE Vale of Taunton, Somerset, is celebrated for its charming residences, its time-honoured families, its beautiful girls; and nowhere, some thirty years ago, were these attributes to be found in more felicitous combination than at Oak Hall, the seat of Archibald Merivale, Esq., major of yeomanry and deputy-lieutenant, throughout the wide archdeaconry. This will be readily believed if I can contrive to give but a faintly-faithful sketch of the Merivale family, as, grouped around its head one summer afternoon, they eagerly anticipated the contents of a letter, bearing the Cambridge postmark, that had just arrived.

Mr. Merivale, who might be a trifle under fifty, was a well-descended, sufficiently wealthy country gentleman and magistrate, of active habits, and considerable

keenness of intellect. His self-estimate as to this latter quality was rather an exaggerated one; piquing himself, as he did, upon a profound knowledge of the world, and power of dealing successfully with it, in all its tricks, shifts, maskings, and devices: a stern, inflexible man, too, when he had once determined on any particular course of action; yet, withal, a thoroughly kind and affectionate husband and father, and considerate, as well as just, landlord and master. Mrs. Merivale, on the contrary, was one of the gentlest, most flexible of human beings, the fine impulses of whose womanly tenderness required and yielded to the masculine support and firmness of her husband. They had three children—daughters—at this time, of the respective ages of twenty, eighteen, and sixteen. Eleanor, the eldest, was a finely-formed person, with calm, brilliant, Diana-like features, and perfectly-shaped head, set magnificently upon the polished shoulders of a Juno. Agnes, the next in age, though nothing like so handsome as her superb sister, was a very attractive person; and her mild, kindly eyes, to my mind, possessed a fascination quite as effective as haughtier and more dazzling ones. Of Clara's beauty—scarcely disclosed as yet—I shall only say that its swiftly brightening dawn gave promise—more indeed than promise—that in its perfect development would be in a high degree combined and blended the varied charms and graces of both her sisters. This, to the general reader, may seem a

highly-coloured portraiture ; whilst those who recognise and remember the family to whom I give the name of Merivale,—and there are many still living who will readily do so,—it will, I am quite sure, be pronounced to be but a faint and spiritless sketch of the three widely-celebrated Graces of Oak Hall.

“ This letter, girls,” Mr. Merivale, at length giving way to their importunity, is saying — “ this letter, girls ; well, it is no doubt, as you say, from Francis Herbert ; and stamped, I perceive, ‘ too late,’ or it would have been here yesterday. Let me see,— ‘ highly delighted,’—‘ with the greatest pleasure,’—‘ have taken the liberty,’ etcetera, and so on. The upshot is, young ladies, that my ward, Francis Herbert, not only accepts mine and your mother’s invitation to pass a month at Oak Hall, but brings his and our acquaintance young Sir Henry Willoughby. Eleanor, love, surely you have not taken to rouge thus early :—there—there, don’t be angry ; the colour, I see, is quite a spontaneous and natural one. They will be here on—on Wednesday, in time for dinner. Why, zounds ! that is to-day. And as I am alive,” continued Mr. Merivale, stepping quickly to the window, “ here comes a post-chaise up the avenue. It is them, sure enough,” he went on to say, after drawing up the blind. “ Francis has his body half out of the chaise-window, eager, no doubt, to obtain the earliest possible glimpse of his respected guardian—don’t you think so, Eleanor ? Hey ! what, all suddenly vanished !

I understand: the exigencies of dress and dinner have set both dame and damsels flying. But here come these interesting visitors."

The young men whose unexpected arrival caused so much commotion at Oak Hall will require a few introductory words only. Mr. Francis Herbert, but recently of age, and a well-principled, amiable person, though of somewhat rash and impulsive temperament, was the possessor of a considerable estate in the neighbourhood of Bath—much improved during his long minority by the care of his guardian, Mr. Merivale—as well as of a large amount of personal property. He was, in fact, an altogether *bon parti* in the estimation of careful and ambitious mothers—equally, perhaps, with Sir Henry Willoughby, of "The Grange," near Taunton, save as respects the title—an advantage counterbalanced in some degree by the circumstance of the dowager Lady Willoughby being still alive, in prime health, and entitled by her husband's will to fifteen hundred per annum, charged upon the son's inheritance. Sir Henry was three or four years older than Francis Herbert, and of a far more jocund, sanguine temper and disposition, which mood of mind was, however, somewhat toned down on the occasion of this visit by the fear that Herbert was as irretrievably in love with the divine Eleanor as he himself was. There were other differences between them. Francis Herbert was a ripe scholar, and had carried off the honours of a senior wrangler at Cambridge University: Sir Henry,

it was said through carelessness and inattention,—for he had good natural talents,—had been plucked at Oxford. When I have further stated that, although Francis Herbert was unquestionably good-looking, Sir Henry was, by general admission, much the handsomest man, I shall have written all that need, in this stage of my narrative, be premised of either of them.

The days passed pleasantly away with the young people ; and, long before the expiration of the month to which the visit of the gentlemen was limited, it was perfectly clear that Sir Henry was desperately in earnest with regard to Eleanor, and that the stately beauty vouchsafed him as much encouragement as a well-bred, modest maiden might. This was far from disagreeable to either of the young lady's parents ; but that which greatly puzzled Mr. Merivale was, that Francis Herbert appeared to be perfectly resigned, or indifferent, to the success of Sir Henry's suit. “A whimsical fellow this *ci-devant* ward of mine,” he would often mentally exclaim. “A twelvemonth ago, if I had not prevented him, he would have made Eleanor an offer in form ; and now I verily believe his weather-cock fancy points to Clara ! To Clara, positively,—a child in years, though, to be sure, somewhat womanly in appearance for her age. If it prove so—but it will be time enough to consider of a serious answer to such a proposal when it shall have been seriously made.”

Two days before the expiration of the month, Mr. Merivale was detained rather late by his magis-

terial duties at Taunton, and finding, when he reached home, important papers that required immediate examination, he withdrew to the library without previous communication with his family or visitors. About eleven o'clock the girls came, one by one, to wish papa good-night; but, preoccupied as he was, neither the bright flush which mantled Eleanor's patrician features, nor the flurry and confusion of manner so unusual with her, arrested his attention. The girlish delight and importance visible in the sweet countenance of Agnes passed equally unnoticed. Not so the stone-pale, yet gleaming and excited aspect and nervous agitation exhibited by Clara. He was effectually startled out of his magisterial meditations; and the thought arose more vividly than before in his mind, of how changed and womanly she had become, in manner and expression, within the last two or three weeks. He was about to question her, but upon second thoughts refrained from doing so, kissed and bade her good night.

She hardly had been gone a minute when Mrs. Merivale came into the library. She, too, was excited,—tearful,—yet smiling through her tears. Sir Henry Willoughby, fortified by a letter from his mother, had formally proposed for the hand of Eleanor, and been conditionally accepted—that condition, of course, being her parents' consent. “I would not have you disturbed,” said Mrs. Merivale, “but I promised you should see his note this evening. Here it is, and also

Lady Willoughby's very kind letter. There cannot, I think, be any doubt as to how we should decide?"

"None whatever, Emily. The girl has drawn a prize in the matrimonial lottery."

"And well deserves to have done so, Archibald," replied the mother, with some quickness.

"No doubt—no doubt. She has my free consent and blessing. But there is another matter I am desirous to speak of. What can be the meaning of the agitation I observed in Clara just now?"

"I can hardly say: but I think Francis Herbert is in some way connected with it."

"I myself judged so: but have you no proof of this?"

"A slight one only. It seems that about dusk this evening, when the girls, and Sir Henry, and Herbert, were walking in the garden, Clara and Herbert became separated from the rest by a considerable distance. At last Eleanor bade Agnes seek them, as it was getting chilly and time to withdraw in-doors. Agnes obeyed, and, as she approached the end of the garden, heard Francis Herbert speaking in earnest, agitated tones; *what* he said she could not distinguish, but hurrying on she found that he was thus addressing Clara, who, in tears and almost fainting, supported herself with difficulty against the fountain there. The moment Agnes came in view, Herbert ceased speaking, Clara dried her tears, took her sister's arm, and, murmuring some indistinct excuse for the emotion she

could not conceal, walked with her towards the house, slowly followed by Herbert. I thought it best to defer questioning her,—but what Agnes witnessed can have, it seems to me, but one interpretation.”

“No doubt; and a very absurd text it is, however interpreted. We shall probably be more enlightened on the matter to-morrow. In the mean time, as Sir Henry is waiting to see me, we had better adjourn to the drawing-room at once.”

The party assembled at breakfast on the following morning at Oak Hall appeared very ill at ease and anxious, always with the exception of Sir Henry Willoughby, who, spite of his well-bred efforts to subdue himself to the level of the common-place world about him, was evidently uplifted in imagination to the starry floor, and breathing the intoxicating atmosphere of the seventh heaven. His beautiful betrothed—spite of herself—looked charmingly conscious, and the fugitive colour came and went upon her cheek with confusing distinctness and rapidity. Francis Herbert—pale, agitated, silent—would have seemed to be unobservant of anything around him, but for the frequent, half-abstracted glances he from time to time directed to the place which Clara—who had excused herself from appearing under the plea of headache—usually occupied. Mr. Merivale was unusually grave and reserved; his excellent lady irrepressibly fidgety and nervous: in fact, the only person present, with the exception of Sir Henry, who appeared at all self-

possessed and at ease, was Agnes ; and even her calm serenity was in some degree disturbed by the manifest discomposure of her relatives. The signal for leaving the table was joyfully welcomed by every one sitting at it, and the apartment was cleared in a twinkling. Mr. Herbert rode out on horseback, and did not return till dinner had been some time over. When he entered the dining-room he found no one there but Mr. Merivale and Sir Henry, the latter of whom withdrew to the drawing-room and the ladies a minute or two afterwards.

Francis Herbert swallowed two or three glasses of wine in quick succession ; and Mr. Merivale presently said, “ You appear strangely agitated, Francis. May I ask the cause ? ”

“ No one has so good a right to do so, and to be truly answered,” was the instant reply. “ The plain truth is, sir,—and I hardly knew it myself till yester evening,—that I respect, admire,—what dull, unmeaning words are these,” he added, breaking into sudden vehemence, and starting to his feet,—“ that I love, worship, idolize, your youngest daughter, Clara ! ”

“ Clara,” echoed Mr. Merivale. “ Pooh ! This is absurd. A man in years,—and I had hoped discretion,—love, worship, idolize, a mere child ! —for Clara is scarcely more.”

“ I knew you would say that,” rejoined Herbert, with kindling fire. “ I have said so to myself a hundred times during my visit here, as each day found

me more hopelessly enthralled. That Clara is young in years, is true; but the graces of her mind and person have far outstripped slow-footed Time; and I live but on the hope that she may one day be my wife."

" You can expect but one reply from me, Francis Herbert, to an aspiration so absurdly premature," said Mr. Merivale, with grave, almost stern earnestness. " It is this"—

" One word more," eagerly interrupted the young man; " I do not ask—I could not dream of asking, an immediate decision, either of you or Clara. I will wait patiently a year—two—three years, if you will, for that. All I pray for is, permission to be near her the while, that I may strive to win the priceless jewel of her love; not by the flattery of protesting words,—these I will never use,—but by the silent homage of a heart which time will prove is wholly and for ever hers!"

" This rhapsody concluded," said Mr. Merivale, " you will perhaps have the kindness to listen to a few words of common sense. Your proposition, translated into ordinary language, amounts to this:—that, having taken a violent fancy—it is really nothing else—for a young girl just at the threshold of life, you wish to deprive her of the opportunity of hereafter forming an intelligent and independent estimate of yourself, in comparison with others, by hampering her, in the eyes of the world, with an implied engagement, to the fulfilment of which, should your present inclination

endure,—which, after what has passed, I must be permitted to doubt,—she would find herself morally coerced, however repugnant to her the sacrifice in the supposed case might be.”

“Mr. Merivale, you libel—insult me!”.

“I have no intention to do either. I quite believe in the present sincerity of the young-manish enthusiasm you have just displayed,—just as I believed a twelvemonth ago that you were in love with Eleanor”—

“I was self-deceived. It was esteem and admiration I felt for Eleanor—not this consuming love!”

“No doubt: and it is quite possible you are also *self-deceived* with regard to Clara! Tut—tut, young man, you may spare your exclamations; they will scarcely turn me from my purpose. However, I do not hesitate to say there is no one I would prefer as a son-in-law to you; and if, after a strict separation of certainly not less than two years”—

“Say separation for ever—you might as well,” passionately interrupted Herbert: “not to see or communicate with each other for two years will be tantamount to that, I feel assured.”

“Not if your mind holds, and Clara, who will then be only eighteen, is willing to accept you. My determination is at all events fixed and immovable; and, after what has passed, I must request that the period of probation may commence at once—to-morrow.”

All to no purpose was it that Herbert implored,

entreated, begged, for even a modification of these hard conditions. Mr. Merivale was deaf to all his pleadings, and further insisted that he should give his word of honour not to correspond, directly or indirectly, with Clara, till the expiration of the stipulated period. He did so at last; and the interview terminated by Mr. Merivale saying, “ You will write to me, of course, as usual ; but let it be an understanding that this subject is to be avoided. And this for two sufficient reasons. One, that, if you change your mind, the penning of excuses for doing so would be unpleasant to yourself; the other, that, supposing you do *not* change your mind, I have a strong distaste for the rapturous literature with which, I have no doubt, you would liberally favour me. And now, my dear boy, let us join the ladies.”

At about noon the next day, Francis Herbert left Oak Hall for France, *via* Southampton, but not till after he had obtained—thanks to Mr. Merivale’s kind offices—a brief parting interview with Clara.

About a twelvemonth after Eleanor’s marriage with Sir Henry Willoughby, and consequently in the second year of the onerous probation imposed upon Francis Herbert, two important events occurred in connection with the Merivale family. An uncle, with whom Clara had ever been the pet and darling, died, and bequeathed her the large sum of thirty thousand pounds and upwards, thus rendering her, in addition to her other attractions, one of the very best matches—in a money

sense—the county of Somerset could boast. Just after this, Agnes Merivale had the good fortune, whilst on a visit to her sister, Lady Willoughby, in London, to attract and fix the admiration of Mr. Irving, a young, well-charactered, and wealthy M.P for one of the midland boroughs. The wedding, it was arranged, should take place a week or so previous to the end of the season, then about two months distant. Amongst the friends whom Mr. Irving introduced to the Willoughbys was a Captain Salford, of the Horse Guards—a fashionable gentleman, of handsome exterior, insinuating manners, and, it was whispered by his particular friends, of utterly ruined fortunes. The charms, personal and pecuniary, of Clara Merivale made a profound impression upon this gallant individual's susceptible heart; and she was instantly assailed by all the specious arts,—the refined homage,—the unobtrusive, but eager deference which practised men of the world can so easily simulate, and which, alas! tell so potently upon the vanity of the wariest-minded maiden. It was not, however, long before Captain Salford discovered that, flattered and pleased as Clara Merivale might be with his attentions, a serious overture, should he venture to hazard one, would be instantly and unhesitatingly rejected. What the secret obstacle was that unexpectedly barred his progress he was not long in discovering—thanks probably to Lady Willoughby, who appears to have entertained a much higher opinion of him than he at all

deserved. And eagerly did his plotting brain revolve scheme after scheme for sundering the strong, if almost impalpable link which bound the separated lovers to each other. One mode of action seemed to promise an almost certain success. Captain Salford had met Francis Herbert frequently abroad, and thoroughly, as he conceived, appreciated the proud and sensitive young man's character. He was also especially intimate with some of the Paris set with whom Herbert chiefly associated. Could he be induced to believe that Clara Merivale thought of him with indifference—or, still better, that she was on the highroad to matrimony with another, Captain Salford had little doubt that he would at once silently resign his pretensions to the favour of the fickle beauty—the more certainly and promptly that she was now a wealthy heiress—and leave the field free to less scrupulous aspirants,—in which eventuality Captain Salford's excellent opinion of himself suggested that success would be certain. Thus reasoning, the astute man of the world persisted in his attentions to the frank, unsuspecting girl, at the same time taking care that the excellent terms on which he stood with her should reach Herbert's ear in as exaggerated a form as possible, through several and apparently trustworthy sources. This scheme his Paris friends soon intimated was working successfully, and he crowned it with a master-stroke.

At the time previously settled upon, the marriage of Agnes Merivale with Mr. Irving was celebrated with

all proper *éclat*, and the wedded pair left town for the bridegroom's residence in Norfolk. On the same day the Merivales and Willoughbys departed for Somersetshire, accompanied by Captain Salford and several others, invited to pass a few weeks at "The Grange." Imagine the astonishment of all these, with the exception of the contriver of the mischief,—and he, indeed, appeared the most surprised and indignant of all—for the lady's sake, of course,—upon finding, on the arrival of the newspapers, the announcement of *two* weddings in their Fashionable Intelligence columns—one that of Agnes, second daughter of Archibald Merivale, Esquire, of Oak Hall, Somersetshire, to Charles Irving, Esq., M.P.; the other that of Clara, *youngest* daughter of Archibald Merivale, Esq., to Captain Salford, of His Majesty's Horse Guards Blue! The blunder, it was concluded, had been caused by the reports of the likelihood of such an occurrence which had frequently appeared amongst the *on dits* of the Sunday papers, confirmed apparently by Captain Salford having accompanied the wedding party to church. Captain Salford volunteered to write a contradiction of the paragraph, and the matter was thought no more of. Indeed, there is no doubt that, with the exception of Clara herself, there was no one present that would not have hailed, with more or less satisfaction, the event thus prematurely, at all events, announced; even Mr. Merivale's boasted keenness and sagacity having failed to detect the heartless worldling

beneath the polished exterior and plausible bearing of the aristocratic guardsman.

The lying paragraph effected its author's purpose, and that right speedily. The visit of Captain Salford had extended to about a fortnight, when he received some papers and letters from Paris which appeared to a good deal excite him. Almost immediately afterwards he informed Lady Willoughby that he was under the necessity of leaving for London that very afternoon. Polite regrets were of course expressed; and it was afterwards remembered, to his advantage, that his manner, the tone of his voice, when taking leave of Clara, were marked by a deep, respectful, almost compassionate tenderness, and Lady Willoughby positively averred that the practised actor's eyes were suffused with irrepressible emotion as he turned to leave her sister's presence. The next post explained, as they believed, the cause of the gallant captain's unusual agitation. It brought a number of Galignani's Paris newspaper, directed in his handwriting, in which they found the following marked paragraph:— “Married, on Tuesday last, at the chapel of the British embassy, the Honourable Caroline Wishart to Francis Herbert, Esquire, of Swan House, near Bath, Somersetshire. Immediately after the conclusion of the ceremony the happy pair left Paris for Italy.”

Something more than four months after this, Captain Salford dined with three or four of his intimates at the *Rocher Cancale*, Paris. The party

were in exuberant spirits, and the exhilarating wine which followed the excellent dinner so loosened their tongues and raised their voices that a gentleman enveloped in a large cloak, though sitting at some distance, with his back towards them, and apparently intent upon the newspapers, had no difficulty in following and thoroughly comprehending their conversation, notwithstanding that no names were mentioned.

“Poor fellow!” one of them remarked, in a tone of ironical compassion, “he was hardly in his right senses, I think, when he married.”

“*Voilà du nouveau, par exemple,*” shouted another, with a burst of merriment. “I should like to know who ever did marry in his right senses,—except, indeed, that, like our gallant captain here, he was about to wed something like fifty thousand pounds as well as a charming girl. By the bye, Salford, is the day fixed for your union with the beautiful Clara?”

“Not the day, exactly—but let us talk of something else!”

“The fair maiden still demurs, does she?” persisted the questioner: “I had heard so. And, by the way, Ingolsby, who met our rashly-married friend a day or two ago,—you are aware, I suppose, that he returned last week from Italy—says it is plain the wound still bleeds, decorously as he strives to conceal it beneath his wedding robe.”

“Bah!” exclaimed Salford; “time has a balm for all such griefs!”

"No doubt; only he is sometimes over tardy with his species."

"That which tickled me most," said another of the party, "was that delicious trick of Salford's in getting his pretended marriage inserted in the newspapers. I happened to call on the supposedly jilted swain the very morning the paper reached him, and never saw I, before or since, a man in such a frenzy. By Jove, his fury was sublime, tremendous! and I really thought it would be necessary to pack him off to a *Maison de Santé*. Fortunately he recovered and married, out of hand, to show his spirit—a less pleasant catastrophe, in my opinion."

"I wish you'd change the subject," said Salford, peevishly. "It bores one to death. Everything is fair in love and war; and if the poor devil was tricked out of— Ha!"

No wonder the glass fell from the speaker's hand, and that he leaped to his feet as if a bomb-shell had exploded beside him, confronted as he suddenly was by the white face and burning eyes of Francis Herbert!

"Captain Salford," said a voice as cold and hard as if it issued from a statue, "allow me to return the favours which it seems you have bestowed upon me in the only way at present within my power." As the last words left the speaker's lips, he lifted a glass of wine and hurled it fiercely in Salford's face! "No uproar, gentlemen, pray," continued Herbert,—"no blustering endeavour, captain,—unless you are a

coward as well as a liar and villain,—to attract the notice of the waiters or of a passing gendarme. This matter can have but one termination, and it is well it should be a quiet one. Monsieur le Capitaine Grégoire," he continued, stepping up to a French officer at the other end of the room, "a word with you, if you please."

Five minutes afterwards Captain Salford and Francis Herbert, accompanied by their respective seconds, were being rapidly driven towards the Bois de Boulogne. Pistols had been procured at the Rocher. "There would hardly be light enough," gruffly remarked le Capitaine Grégoire, "but for the heavy fall of snow. As it is, we shall manage, I dare say." He then placed his man; Captain Salford's second did the same: and, no effort at accommodation being attempted, the signal was quickly sped,—the simultaneous crack of the two pistols rang through the air,—followed by a scream of mortal agony, and Captain Salford was seen to fall heavily, with his face upon the snow.

"It is finished with your antagonist," said le Capitaine Grégoire, approaching Herbert, who was apparently unhurt, though his eyes gleamed wildly. "And you?"

"Is—is—he—dead?" surged through the white, quivering lips of Francis Herbert.

"As Alexander," replied Grégoire. "Why is your hand there?" he added quickly: "you, too, are hurt."

"To death!" groaned Herbert, as he fell into his second's outstretched arms. "O God, forgive me!"

On the precise day two years that Francis Herbert was exiled from Oak Hall, a parcel was delivered there by a servant in deep mourning. Mr. Merivale, to whom it was directed, opened it with trembling hands, and found that it contained a ring, which he at once recognised to have belonged to his daughter Clara; and a paper upon which was written, in a feeble but well-remembered hand—"When you receive this, my probation will be accomplished. This is your work and mine. I forgive you as I trust to be forgiven. The ring is Clara's,—hers, too, will be my last thought. Farewell. F. H."

Francis Herbert was buried at Père La Chaise, and on each anniversary of his death an English lady—upon whose sad, mild features the angel-beauty of her youth still sheds a sun-set radiance—is seen to kneel and weep upon his grave. That lady is Clara Merivale.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 9.—THE STOLEN BANK NOTES.

THE newspapers of 1810 contained a few brief paragraphs,—cold, bare, and partial as a tombstone, relative to a singular and, to my thinking, instructive passage in the domestic annals of this country, with which I happened to be very intimately acquainted. The impression it produced on me at the time was vivid and profound, and a couple of lines in a Liverpool journal the other day, curtly announcing the death of a Madame L'Estrange, recalled each incident as freshly to memory as if graven there but yesterday, and moreover induced me to pen the following narrative, in which, now that I can do so without the risk of giving pain or offence to any one, I have given the whole affair, divested of colouring, disguise, or concealment.

My father, who had influence with the late Lord

Bexley, then Mr. Vansittart, procured me, three weeks after I came of age, a junior clerkship in one of the best paid of our Government offices. In the same department were two young men, my seniors by about six or seven years only, of the names of Martin Travers and Edward Capel. Their salaries were the same—three hundred pounds a-year,—and both had an equal chance of promotion to the vacancy likely soon to occur, either by the death or superannuation of Mr. Rowdell, an aged and ailing chief clerk. I had known them slightly before I entered the office, inasmuch as our families visited in the same society, and we were very soon especially intimate with each other. They were, I found, fast friends, though differing greatly in character and temperament. I liked Martin Travers much the best of the two. He was a handsome, well-grown, frank-spoken, generous young man, and never have I known a person so full of buoyant life as he,—of a temper so constantly gay and cheerful. Capel was of a graver, more saturnine disposition, with lines about the mouth indicative of iron inflexibility of nerve and will; yet withal a hearty fellow enough, and living, it was suspected, *quite* up to his income, if not to something considerably over. I had not been more than about three months in the office, when a marked change was perceptible in both. Gradually they had become cold, distant, and at last utterly estranged from each other; and it was suggested by several amongst us, that jealousy as to who should suc-

ceed to Rowdell's snug salary of six hundred a-year might have produced the evidently bad feeling between them. This might, I thought, have generated the lowering cloud hourly darkening and thickening upon Capel's brow, but could scarcely account for the change in Martin Travers. He, whose contagious gaiety used to render dullness and ill-humour impossible in his presence, was now fitful, moody, irascible; his daily tasks were no longer gone through with the old cheerful alacrity; and finally—for he was morbidly impatient of being questioned—I jumped to the conclusion—partly from some half-words dropped, and partly from knowing where they both occasionally visited—that the subtle influence which from the days of Helen downwards—and I suppose upwards—has pleased and plagued mankind, was at the bottom of the matter. I was quite right, and proof was not long waited for. I was walking early one evening along Piccadilly with Travers—who appeared by the bye to wish me further, though he was too polite to say so—when we came suddenly upon Capel. I caught his arm, and insisted that he should take a turn with us as he used to do. I thought that possibly a quiet word or two on the beauty and excellence of kindly brotherhood amongst men might lead to a better feeling between them. I was deucedly mistaken. My efforts in that line, awkwardly enough made I dare say, proved utterly abortive. Capel, indeed, turned back, rather than, as I supposed, fussily persist in going on; but both he and Travers

strode on as stiffly as grenadiers on parade, their cheeks flushed, their eyes alight with angry emotion, and altogether sullen and savage as bears. What seemed odd, too, when Travers turned sharply round within a short distance of Hyde-park-corner, with a scarcely disguised intention of shaking us off, Capel whirled round as quickly, as if quite as resolutely determined not to be shaken off; whilst I, considerably alarmed by the result of the pacific overture I had ventured upon, did, of course, the same. We stalked on in silence, till just as we reached Hoby's and a Mr. Hervey, with his daughter Constance, turned suddenly out of St. James's Street. I was fiery hot to the tips of my ears in an instant. Travers and Capel stopped abruptly, stared fiercely at each other, and barely recovered presence of mind in sufficient time to lift their hats in acknowledgment of Mr. Hervey's brief greeting and the lady's slight bow, as, after half-pausing, they passed on. It was all clear enough now. My two gentlemen had come to Piccadilly in the hope of meeting with Constance Hervey, and accompanying her home; frustrated in this they had determined not to lose sight of each other; nor did they for three mortal hours, during which, anxiety lest their rancorous ill-humour should break out into open quarrel, kept me banging about from post to pillar with them,—a sullen companionship, so utterly wearisome that I had several times half a mind to propose that they should fight it out at once, or toss

up which should jump for the other's benefit into the Thames. At length, ten o'clock struck, and, it appearing to be mutually concluded that a visit to Kensington was no longer possible, a sour expression of relief escaped them, and our very agreeable party separated.

A very dangerous person in such a crisis was, I knew, this Constance Hervey, though by no means a catch in a pecuniary sense for well-connected young men with present salaries of three hundred a-year, and twice as much in near expectancy. Her father, who had once held his head pretty high in the commercial world, had not long since become bankrupt, and they were now living upon an annuity of little more, I understood, than a hundred pounds, so secured to Mr. Hervey that his creditors could not touch it. This consideration, however, is one that weighs very little with men in the condition of mind of Capel and Travers, and I felt that, once enthralled by Constance Hervey's singular beauty, escape, or resignation to disappointment, was very difficult and hard to bear. She was no favourite of mine, just then, by the way. I had first seen her about three years previously,—and even then, whilst yet the light, the simplicity, the candour of young girlhood lingered over, and softened the rising graces of the woman, I read in the full depths of her dark eyes an exulting consciousness of beauty, and the secret instinct of its power. Let me, however, in fairness state that I had myself—moon-

calf that I must have been—made sundry booby, blushing advances to the youthful beauty, and the half-amused, half-derisive merriment with which they were received, gave a twist, no doubt, to my opinion of the merits of a person so provokingly blind to mine. Be this, however, as it may, there could be no question that Constance Hervey was now a very charming woman, and I was grieved only, not surprised, at the bitter rivalry that had sprung up between Travers and Capel—a rivalry which each successive day but fed and strengthened!

Capel appeared to be fast losing all control over his temper and mode of life. He drank freely—that was quite clear; gambled, it was said, and rumours of debt, protested bills, ready money raised at exorbitant interest on the faith of his succeeding to Rowdell's post, flew thick as hail about the office. Should he obtain the coveted six hundred a-year, Constance Hervey would, I doubted not—first favourite as Travers now seem to be,—descend to be Mrs. Capel. This not very complimentary opinion I had been mentally repeating some dozen times with more than ordinary bitterness as I sat alone one evening after dinner in our little dining-room in Golden-square, when the decision came.

The governor being out, I had, perhaps, taken a few extra glasses of wine, and nothing, in my experience, so lights up and inflames tender or exasperating reminiscences as fine old port.

“Rat-tat-tat-tat.” It was unmistakeably Travers’s knock, and boisterously-hilarious too as in the old time, before any Constance Herveys had emerged from pianofortes and tuckers to distract and torment mankind, and more especially well-to-do Government clerks. The startled maid-servant hastened to the door, and I had barely gained my feet and stretched myself, when in bounced Travers—radiant,—ablaze with triumph.

“Hollo, Travers! Why, where the deuce do you spring from, eh?”

“From Heaven! Paradise!—the presence of an angel at all events!”

“There, there, that will do; I quite understand.”

“No you don’t, Ned. Nobody but myself *can* understand, imagine, guess, dream of the extent, the vastness of the change that has come over my life. Firstly, then—but this is nothing—Rowdell is, at length, superannuated, and I am to have his place.”

He paused a moment; and I, with certainly a more than half-envious sneer, said—“And upon the strength of that piece of luck you have proposed to Constance Hervey, and been accepted—of course.”

“*Jubilate*—yes! Feel how my pulse throbs! It is four hours since, and still my brain lightens and my eyes dazzle with the tumultuous joy. Do not light the candles; I shall grow calmer in this twilight.”

"Confound his raptures," was my internal ejaculation. "Why the mischief couldn't he take them somewhere else?" I however said nothing, and he presently resumed the grateful theme. "You will be at the wedding, of course. And by the bye, now I think of it, haven't I heard Constance say she especially remembers you for something—I forget exactly what,—but something pleasant and amusing—very!"

My face kindled to flame, and I savagely whirled the easy chair in which I sat two or three yards back from the fire-light before speaking. "I am extremely obliged to the lady, and so I dare say is poor Capel, who, it seems, has been so carelessly thrown over."

"Carelessly thrown over!" rejoined Travers, sharply. "That is a very improper expression. If he has, as I fear, indulged in illusions, he has been only self-deceived. Still, his double disappointment grieves me. It seems to cast—though there is no valid reason that it should do so—a shadow on my conscience."

We were both silent for some time. I was in no mood for talking, and he sat gazing dreamily at the fire. I knew very well whose face he saw there. I have seen it myself in the same place a hundred times.

"There is another drawback, Ned," he at length resumed. "Our marriage must be deferred six months at the least. I have but about two hundred pounds in ready money, and the lease and furniture

of the house we shall require, would cost at least double that."

"Any respectable establishment would credit you for the furniture upon the strength of your greatly-increased salary."

"So I urged; but Constance has such a perfect horror of debt—arising, no doubt, from her father's misfortunes,—that she positively insists we must wait till everything required in our new establishment can be paid for when purchased. I could, I think, raise the money upon my own acceptance, but, should Constance hear that I had done so, she would, I fear, withdraw her promise."

"Stuff and nonsense! Six hundred a-year cannot be picked up every day."

"You do not know Constance Hervey. But come: I must have patience! Six—nine months are not a lifetime. Good-bye. I knew you would be rejoiced to hear of my good fortune."

"Oh, of course,—particularly delighted, in fact! Good evening." I have slept better than I did that night.

It was Sunday evening when Travers called on me, and Capel did not make his appearance at the office till the Friday following, his excuse being urgent private business. Harassing business, if that were so, it must have been, for a sharp fever could scarcely have produced a greater change for the worse in his personal appearance. He was mentally changed as

greatly. He very heartily congratulated Travers on his promotion, and took moreover the first opportunity of privately assuring him that his (Capel's) transient fancy for Miss Hervey had entirely passed away, and he cordially complimented his former rival on having succeeded in that quarter also. This was all remarkably queer, *I* thought; but Travers, from whose mind a great load seemed taken, willingly believed him, and they were better friends than ever; Capel, the more thoroughly, it seemed, to mark his acquiescent indifference, accompanying Travers once or twice to the Herveys. So did *I*; though *I* would have given something the first time to have been anywhere else; for, if a certain kneeling-down, garden-arbour scene did not play about the lady's coral lips, and gleam for a moment from the corners of her bewildering eyes, my pulse was as steady and temperate just then as it is now, after the frosts of more than sixty winters have chilled its beatings. She was, however, very kind and courteous, a shade *too* considerately gentle and patronizing perhaps, and *I* became a rather frequent visitor. An ancient aunt, a very worthy soul, lived with them, with whom *I* now and then took a turn at backgammon, whilst the affianced couple amused themselves with chess—such chess! Travers was, *I* knew, a superior player, but on these occasions he hardly appeared to know a queen from a rook, or a bishop from a pawn. They were thus absurdly engaged one evening, when *I* made a dis-

covery which, if it did not much surprise, greatly pained and somewhat alarmed me. Aunt Jane had left the room on some household intent, and I, partly concealed in the recess where I sat, by the window-curtain, silently contemplated the queer chess-playing, the entranced delight of the lover, and the calm, smiling graciousness of the lady. I have felt in a more enviable frame of mind,—more composed, more comfortable than I did just then, but, good lord! what was my innocent little pit-pat compared with the storm of hate, and fury, and despair, which found terrific expression in the countenance that, as attracted by a slight noise I hastily looked up, met my view! It was Capel's. He had entered the room, the door being ajar, unobserved, and was gazing, as he supposed, unmarked, at the chess-players. I was so startled that I, mechanically as it were, sprang to my feet, and, as I did so, Capel's features, by a strong effort of will, resumed their ordinary expression, save for the deathly pallor that remained, and a nervous quivering of the upper lip which could not be instantly mastered. I was more than satisfied as to the true nature of smooth-seeming Mr. Capel's sentiments towards the contracted couple, but, as *they* had observed nothing, I thought it wisest to hold my peace. I could not, however, help smiling at the confiding simplicity with which Travers, as we all three walked homewards together, sought counsel of Capel as to the readiest means of raising—unknown to Miss Hervey—the

funds necessary to be obtained before Prudence, as interpreted by that lady, would permit his marriage. Slight help, thought I, for such a purpose, will be afforded by the owner of the amiable countenance I saw just now.

It was just a week after this that thunder fell upon our office by the discovery that sixteen hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, sent in by different parties late on the previous day, had disappeared, together with a memorandum-book containing the numbers and dates. Great, it may be imagined, was the consternation amongst us all, and a rigorous investigation, which, however, led to nothing, was immediately instituted. Capel, who showed extraordinary zeal in the matter, went, accompanied by one of the chief clerks, to the parties from whom the notes had been received, for fresh lists, in order that payment might be stopped. On their return it was given out that no accurate, reliable list could be obtained. This, it was afterwards found, was a *ruse* adopted in order to induce the thief or thieves to more readily attempt getting the notes into circulation.

This occurred in the beginning of September, and about the middle of October Travers suddenly informed me that he was to be married on the following Monday,—this was Tuesday. The lease of a house at Hammersmith had, he said, been agreed for, the furniture ordered, and everything was to be completed and paid for by the end of the present week.

"And the money—the extra two hundred and odd pounds required — how has that been obtained?" "Of my uncle, Woolridge, a marriage *gift*, though he won't, I believe, be present at the wedding," returned the bridegroom elect with a joyous chuckle. I was quite sure from his manner, as well as from my knowledge of his uncle's penurious character, that this was a deception. Constance Hervey's scruples, I had always thought, now that it was certain his next quarter's salary would be one hundred and fifty pounds, were somewhat overstrained and unreasonable, —still I was vexed that he had stooped to deceive her by such a subterfuge. It was, however, no especial affair of mine, and I reluctantly accepted his invitation to dine at the Herveys' with him on the last day of his bachelorhood—that is, on the following Sunday. Capel was invited, but he refused. I also declined, and resolutely, to attend the wedding. That would, I felt, be *un peu trop fort* just then.

A very pleasant party assembled at Mr. Hervey's on the afternoon of that terrible Sunday, and we were cheerfully chatting over the dessert, when the servant-girl announced that four gentlemen were at the door who said they *must* see Mr. Travers instantly.

"*Must* see me!" exclaimed Travers. "Very peremptory, upon my word. With your leave, sir,—yours, Constance, I will see these very determined gentlemen here. Bid them walk in, Susan."

Before Susan could do so, the door opened, and in

walked the strangers *without* invitation. One of them, a square, thick-set, bullet-headed man, it instantly struck me I had been in company with before. Oh! to be sure!—he was the officer who conducted the investigation in the matter of the stolen notes. What on earth could *he* want there—or with Travers?

“ You paid, Mr. Travers,” said he bluntly, “ something over four hundred pounds to these two gentlemen yesterday?”

“ Yes, certainly I did; no doubt about it.”

“ Will you tell us then, if you please, where you obtained the notes in which you made those payments?”

“ Obtained them—where I obtained them?” said Travers, who did not, I think, immediately recognize the officer. To be sure. “ Four of them,—four fifties,—I have had by me for some time—and—and”—

“ The two one-hundred pound notes,—how about them?” quietly suggested the man, seeing Travers hesitate.

Travers, more confused than alarmed, perhaps, but white as the paper on which I am writing, glanced hurriedly round,—we had all impulsively risen to our feet—till his eye rested upon Constance Hervey’s eagerly-attentive countenance. “ I received them,” he stammered, repeating, I was sure, a falsehood, “ from my uncle, Mr. Woolridge, of Tottenham.”

“ Then of course you will have no objection to accompany us to your uncle, Mr. Woolridge, of Tottenham.”

"Certainly not; but not now. To-morrow,—you see I am engaged now."

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Travers, that you *must* go with us. Those two notes were amongst those stolen from the office to which you belong."

There was a half-stifled scream—a broken sob, and, but for me, Constance Hervey would have fallen senseless on the floor. Travers was in the merciless grasp of the officers, who needlessly hurried him off, spite of his frantic entreaties for a brief delay. The confusion and terror of such a scene may be imagined, not described. Although at first somewhat staggered, five minutes had not passed before I felt thoroughly satisfied that Travers was the victim of some diabolical plot; and I pretty well guessed of whose concoction. An untruth he had no doubt been guilty of, through fear of displeasing his betrothed,—but guilty of stealing money—of plundering the office!—bah!—the bare supposition was an absurdity.

As soon as Miss Hervey was sufficiently recovered to listen, I endeavoured to reason with her in this sense, but she could not sufficiently command her attention. "My brain is dizzy and confused as yet," she said; "do you follow, and ascertain, as far as possible, *all* the truth,—the worst truth. I shall be calmer when you return."

"I did so, and in less than two hours I was again at Kensington. Travers was locked up, after confessing that his statement of having received the

hundred-pound notes of his uncle, Woolridge, was untrue. He would probably be examined at Bow-street the next day — his wedding-day, as he had fondly dreamed !

I found Constance Hervey—unlike her father and aunt, who were moaning and lamenting about the place like distracted creatures—perfectly calm and self-possessed, though pale as Parian marble. I told her all,—all I had heard and seen, and all that I suspected. Her eyes kindled to intensest lustre as I spoke. “I have no doubt,” she said, “that your suspicions point the right way, but proof, confronted as we shall be by that wretched falsehood, will, I fear, be difficult. But I will not despair; the truth will, I trust, ultimately prevail. And remember, Thornton,” she added, “that we count entirely upon you.” She gave me her hand on saying this; I clutched it with ridiculous enthusiasm, and blurted out,—as if I had been a warlike knight instead of a peaceable clerk,—“ You may, Miss Hervey, to the death ! ” In fact, at that particular moment, although by no means naturally pugnacious, and moreover of a somewhat delicate constitution, I think I should have proved an ugly customer had there been anybody in the way to fight with. This, however, not being the case, I consulted with Mr. Hervey as to what legal assistance ought to be secured, and it was finally determined that I should request Mr. Elkins, a solicitor residing in Lothbury, to take Travers’s instructions, and that Mr.

Alley, the barrister, should be retained to attend at Bow-street. This matter settled, I took my leave.

I had a very unsatisfactory account to render on the morrow evening to the anxious family at Kensington. Travers's appearance at Bow-street had been deferred at the request of his solicitor to Wednesday, in order that the individual from whom the prisoner *now* declared he had received the stolen notes might be communicated with. The explanation given by Travers to the solicitor was briefly this:—About seven months previously he had amassed a considerable sum in guineas,—then bearing a high premium, although it was an offence at law to dispose of them for more in silver or notes than their nominal value. Somebody—Mr. Capel, he was pretty sure, but would not be positive—mentioned to him the name of one Louis Brocard, of No. 18, Brewer-street, as a man who would be likely to give him a good price for his gold. Travers accordingly saw Brocard, who, after considerable haggling, paid him two hundred pounds in Bank of England notes—four fifties,—for one hundred and sixty-two guineas. That lately he, Travers, had often mentioned to Capel, that he wished to raise, as secretly as possible, on his own personal security, a sum of at least two hundred pounds, and that Capel—this he was sure of, as not more than a month had since elapsed—Capel had advised him to apply to Louis Brocard for assistance. He had done so, and Brocard had given him the two one hundred pound

notes in exchange for a note of hand, at six months' date, for two hundred and twenty pounds. I had obtained temporary leave of absence from the office, and, at the solicitor's request, I accompanied him to Brewer-street. Brocard,—a strong-featured, swarthy *émigré* from the south of France, Languedoc, I believe, who had been in the country since '92, and spoke English fluently, was at home, and I could not help thinking from his manner, expecting and prepared for some such visit. There was a young woman with him, his niece, he said, Marie Deschamps, of the same cast of features as himself, but much handsomer, and with dark fiery eyes, that upon the least excitement seemed to burn like lightning. Brocard confirmed Travers's statement without hesitation as to the purchase of the gold and the discount of the bill. "In what money did you pay the two hundred pounds for which you received the acceptance?" asked the solicitor.

"I will tell you," replied Brocard, coolly. "Marie, give me the pocket-book from the desk—the red one. September 26th," he continued, after adjusting his spectacles, "Martin Travers, four fifty Bank of England notes,"—and he read off the dates and numbers, of which I possess no memoranda.

"Why, those are the notes!" exclaimed Mr. Elkins, very much startled, and glancing at a list in his hand, "which you paid Mr. Travers for the gold, and which you and others I could name, knew he had not since parted with!"

A slight flush crossed the Frenchman's brow, and the niece's eyes gleamed with fierce expression at these words. The emotion thus displayed was but momentary.

"You are misinformed," said Brocard. "Here is a memorandum made at the time (March 3rd) of the notes paid for the gold. You can read it yourself. The largest in amount, you will see, was a twenty."

"Do you mean to persist in asserting," said Mr. Elkins, after several moments of dead silence, "that you did not pay Mr. Travers for his bill of exchange in two one hundred pound notes?"

"Persist," exclaimed the Frenchman. "I don't understand your 'persist!'" I have told you the plain truth. Persist—*parbleu!*"

I was dumbfounded. "Pray, Monsieur Brocard," said the solicitor, suddenly, "do you know Mr. Capel?"

The swarthy flush was plainer now, and not so transitory. "Capel—Capel," he muttered, averting his face towards his niece. "Do we know Capel, Marie?"

"No doubt your niece does, Mr. Brocard," said the solicitor, with a sharp sneer, "or that eloquent face of hers belies her."

In truth, Marie Deschamps' features were aflame with confused and angry consciousness; and her brilliant eyes sparkled with quick ire, as she retorted,—"And if I do, what then?"

"Nothing, *perhaps*, young lady; but my question was addressed to your uncle."

"I have nothing more to say," rejoined Brocard. "I know nothing of the hundred pound notes; very little of Mr. Capel, whom now, however, I remember. And pray, sir," he added, with a cold, malignant smile,—"did I not hear this morning, that Martin Travers informed the officers that it was a relation, an uncle, I believe, from whom he received the said notes,—stolen notes, it seems? He will endeavour to inculpate some one else by-and-by, I dare say."

There was no parrying this thrust, and we came away, much disturbed and discouraged. I remained late that evening at Kensington, talking the unfortunate matter over; but hope, alas! of a safe deliverance for poor Travers appeared impossible, should Brocard persist in his statement. The prisoner's lodgings had been minutely searched, but no trace of the still missing fourteen hundred pounds had been discovered there. Constance Hervey appeared to be greatly struck with my account of Marie Deschamps' appearance and demeanour, and made me repeat each circumstance over and over again. I could not comprehend how this could so much interest her at such a time.

Brocard repeated his statement, on oath, at Bow-street, and Mr. Alley's cross-examination failed to shake his testimony. The first declaration made by Travers necessarily deprived his after protestations,

vehement as they were, of all respect; but I could not help feeling surprise that the barrister's suggestion that it was absurd to suppose that a man in possession of the very large sum that had been stolen, would have *borrowed* two hundred pounds at an exorbitant interest, was treated with contempt. All that, it was hinted, was a mere colourable contrivance to be used in case of detection. The prisoner feared to put too many of the notes in circulation at once, and the acceptance would have been paid for in the stolen moneys, and so on. Finally, Travers was committed for trial, and bail was refused.

As the star of the unfortunate Travers sank in disastrous eclipse, that of Capel shone more brilliantly. There was no doubt that he would succeed, on his rival's conviction, to the vacated post; and some eight or nine weeks after Travers had been committed, circumstances occurred which induced me to believe that he would be equally successful in another respect. I must also say that Capel evinced from the first much sorrow for his old friend's lamentable fall; he treated the notion of his being guiltless with disdain, and taking me one day aside, he said he should endeavour to get Brocard out of the country before the day of trial, either by fair means or by tipping him the Alien Act. "In fact," he added, with some confusion of manner, "I have faithfully promised Miss Hervey, that for *her* sake, though she can have no more doubt of his guilt than I have, that no effort shall be spared

to prevent his *legal* conviction ; albeit, life without character will be, I should think, no great boon to him."

"For *her* sake ! You, Edward Capel, have faithfully promised Miss Hervey to attempt this for *her* sake !" I exclaimed, as soon as I could speak for sheer astonishment.

"Ay, truly ; does that surprise you, Thornton ?" he added with a half-bitter, half-Malvolio smile.

"Supremely ; and if it be as your manner intimates, why then, Frailty, thy name in very truth is ——"

"Woman !" broke in Capel, taking the word out of my mouth. "No doubt of it, from the days of Eve till ours. But come, let us return to business."

I had been for some time grievously perplexed by the behaviour of Constance Hervey. Whenever I had called at Kensington, I found, that though at times she appeared to be on the point of breaking through a self-imposed restraint, all mention of Travers, as far as possible, was avoided, and that some new object engrossed the mind of Constance, to the exclusion of every other. What a light did this revelation of Capel's throw on her conduct and its motives ! And it was such a woman as that, was it, that I had enshrined in the inmost recesses of my heart, and worshipped as almost a divinity ! Great God !

These thoughts were trembling on my lips, when a brief note was brought me :—"Miss Hervey's compliments to Mr. Edward Thornton, and she will be

obliged if, late as it is, he will hasten to Kensington immediately." I had never seen a line of hers before in my life, and it was wonderful how all my anger, suspicion, scorn, vanished, — exhaled, before those little fly-stroke characters ; so much so that—but no, I won't expose myself. A hack soon conveyed me to Kensington ; Mr. Hervey, Constance, and good Aunt Jane were all there in the parlour, evidently in expectation of my arrival. Miss Hervey proceeded to business at once.

" You have not seen Marie Deschamps lately, I believe ? "

" Not I ! The last time I saw her was in Bow-street, whither she accompanied her scoundrel of an uncle."

" Well, you must see her again to-morrow. She is deeply attached to Mr. Capel, and expects that he will marry her as soon as Martin Travers is convicted, and he, Capel, has secured the vacant place."

" Ha !"

" Mr. Capel," continued Miss Hervey, and a glint of sparkling sunlight shot from her charming eyes, " has been foolish enough to prefer another person,—at least so I am instructed by papa, with whom the gentleman left this note, not yet opened, addressed to me, some three hours since. I can imagine its contents, but let us see."

I cannot depict in words the scorn, contempt, pride,—triumph, too,—that swept over that beautiful countenance. " Very impassioned, and eloquent, upon my

word," she said; "I only wonder such burning words did not fire the paper. Now, Mr. Thornton, you must see this forsaken damsel, Marie Deschamps, and acquaint her with Mr. Capel's inconstancy. She will require proof,—it shall be afforded her. In answer to this missive, I shall appoint Mr. Capel to see me here to-morrow evening at seven o'clock. Do you bring her by half-past six, and place yourselves in yon little ante-room, where every thing done here, and every word spoken, can be distinctly seen and heard. This well managed, I am greatly deceived in those southern eyes of hers if the iniquitous plot, of which there can be no doubt she holds the clue, will not receive an unlooked for solution."

"Charming! glorious! beautiful!" I was breaking into *éclats* of enthusiastic admiration, but Miss Hervey, who was too earnest and excited to listen patiently to rhapsodies, cut me short with "My dear sir, it's getting very late; and there is, you know, much to be done to-morrow." It is not pleasant to be let down so suddenly when you are particularly stilted, but as I was by this time pretty well used to it, I submitted with the best possible grace, and, after receiving some other explanations and directions, took leave.

I obtained an interview without difficulty on the following morning with Marie Deschamps, just before office hours, and in her uncle's absence. She was curious to know the object of my visit; but her man-

ner, though free and gay, was carefully guarded and unrelenting, till I gradually and cautiously introduced the subject of Capel's infidelity. It was marvellous how, as each sentence fell upon her ear, her figure stiffened into statue-like rigidity, and her eyes kindled with fiery passion. "If this be so," she said, when I ceased speaking, "he is playing with his life! Is she the lady I passed a fortnight since, when with him in the park?" "Describe the lady, and I will tell you." She did so; it was the exact portrait of Miss Hervey, and so I told her. "I had a misgiving at the time," she said; "if it prove true,—but I will believe, after what has passed, only my own eyes and ears."

This was all we desired; a satisfactory arrangement was agreed upon, and I left her, not without hugging self-gratulation that *I* was not the recreant sweet-heart about to be caught *in flagrante delicto* by such a damsel.

I watched Capel that day with keen attention. He was much excited it was evident, and withal ill at ease: there was a nervous apprehensiveness in his manner and aspect I had never before noticed, over which, however, from time to time quick flashes of exultation glimmered, sparkled, and then vanished. Is it, thought I, the shadow of a sinister catastrophe that already projects over and awes, appals him? It might be.

Marie Deschamps and I were ensconced punctually at the hour named in the little slip of a closet communicating with the Herveys' upstairs sitting-room.

Nobody appeared there till about five minutes to seven, when Constance, charmingly attired, and looking divinely,—though much agitated I could see through all her assumed firmness,—entered, and seated herself upon a small couch, directly in front of the tiny window through which we cautiously peered. “No wonder,” I mentally exclaimed, “that Capel has been beguiled of all sense or discretion!”

“In reply to Marie Deschamps’ look of jealous yet admiring surprise, I whispered, pointing to the neat but poor furniture, “Capel expects, you know, soon to have six hundred a year.” “Ah,” she rejoined, in the same tone, “and in this country gold is God!” “And all the saints in yours, I believe; but hark! there is a knock at the door; it is he, no doubt.”

Comparatively dark as the closet was, I could see the red, swarthy colour come and go on the young woman’s cheeks and forehead; and I fancied I could hear the violent and hurried beating of her heart. Presently Mr. Capel entered the apartment; his features were flushed as with fever, and his whole manner exhibited uncontrollable agitation. His first words were unintelligible, albeit their purport might be guessed. Miss Hervey, though much disturbed also, managed to say, after a few moments’ awkward silence, and with a half-ironical yet fascinating smile, taking up as she spoke a letter which lay upon the table, “Upon my word, Mr. Capel, this abrupt proposal of yours appears to me, under the circum-

stances, to be singularly ill-timed and premature, besides"—

This lady's discomposure had, it struck me, dissipated a half-formed suspicion in Capel's mind that some trap or mystification was preparing for him, and, throwing himself at the feet of Constance, he gave way to a torrent of fervent, headlong protestation, which there could be no question was the utterance of genuine passion. Marie Deschamps felt this, and but that I forcibly held her back, she would have burst into the room at once: as it was she pressed her arms across her bosom with her utmost force, as if to compress, keep down, the wild rage by which she was, I saw, shaken and convulsed. Miss Hervey appeared affected by Capel's vehemence, and she insisted that he should rise and seat himself. He did so, and after a minute or so of silence, Constance again resolutely addressed herself to the task she had determined to perform.

"But the lady, Mr. Capel, whom we saw you conversing with not long since in the park; one Marie—Marie, something?"—

"The name of such a person as Marie Deschamps should not sully Miss Hervey's lips, even in jest; ha!"—

No wonder he stopped abruptly, and turned round with quick alarm. Till that moment I had with difficulty succeeded in holding the said Marie, but no sooner was her name thus contemptuously pronounced,

than she plucked a small, glittering instrument from her bodice,—the half of a pair of scissors, it seemed to me, but pointed and sharp as a dagger,—and drove it into my arm with such hearty good will, that I loosed her in a twinkling. In she burst upon the utterly astounded Capel with a cry of rage and vengeance, and struck furiously at him right and left, at the same time hurling in his face the epithets of “liar!” “traitor!” “robber!” “villain!” and so on, as thick as hail, and with maniacal fury. I had instantly followed, and at the same moment Mr. Hervey, and the officer who arrested Travers, came in by another door. I and Mr. Hervey placed ourselves before Constance, who was terribly scared, for this stabbing business was more than we had looked or bargained for. The officer seized Marie Deschamps’ arm, and with some difficulty wrenched the dangerous weapon she wielded with such deadly ferocity from her grasp. It was as I supposed, a sharpened scissors-blade, and keen, as a large scar on my arm still testifies, as a poinard. Capel, paralyzed, bewildered by so unexpected and furious an attack, and bleeding in several places, though not seriously hurt, staggered back to the wall, against which he supported himself, as he gazed with haggard fear and astonishment at the menacing scene before him.

“And so you would marry that lady, thief and villain that you are!” continued the relentless young fury! she shall know, then, what you are; that it was you contrived the stealing of the bank notes, which”—

"Marie!" shrieked Capel, "dear Marie! for your own sake, stop! I will do anything"——

"Dog! traitor!" she broke in, with even yet wilder passion than before, if that were possible: "it is too late. I know you now, and spit at both you and your promises! It was you, I say, who brought my uncle the one hundred pound notes by which your friend, Martin Travers, has been entrapped!"

"'Tis false! the passionate, mad, jealous fool lies!" shouted Capel, with frantic terror.

"Lie, do I? Then there is *not* a thousand pounds worth of the stolen notes concealed at this moment beneath the floor of your sitting-room, till an opportunity can be found of sending them abroad! That, unmatched villain that you are! is false too, perhaps?"

She paused from sheer exhaustion, and for a brief space no one spoke, so suddenly had the blow fallen. Presently the officer said, "The game is up, you see, at last, Mr. Capel; you will go with me;" and he stepped towards the unhappy culprit. Capel, thoroughly desperate, turned, sprang with surprising agility over a dining table, threw up a window-sash, and leapt into the street. The height was not so much, but his feet caught in some iron railing, and he fell head foremost on the pavement, fracturing his skull frightfully. Before an hour had passed he was dead.

Brocard contrived to escape, but the evidence of

Marie Deschamps and the finding of the stolen notes, in accordance with her statement, fully established the innocence of Travers, and he was restored to freedom and his former position in the world. He and Constance Hervey, to whom he owed so much, were married three months after his liberation, and I officiated, by particular desire, as bride's father.

I had lost sight of Marie Deschamps for some twelve or thirteen years, when I accidentally met her in Liverpool. She was a widow, having married and buried a M. L'Estrange, a well-to-do person there, who left her in decent circumstances. We spoke together of the events I have briefly but faithfully narrated, and she expressed much contrition for the share she had taken in the conspiracy against Travers. I fancied, too,—it was perhaps an unjust fancy,—that, knowing I had lately been promoted to four hundred a year, she wished to dazzle me with those still bright eyes of hers,—a bootless effort, by whomsoever attempted. The talismanic image daguerreotyped upon my heart in the bright sunlight of young manhood could have no rival there, and is even now as fresh and radiant as when first impressed, albeit the strong years have done their work yet very gently, upon the original. It could scarcely be otherwise, living visibly, as she still does, in youthful grace and beauty in the person of the gay gipsy I am, please God, soon to "give away," at St. Pancras Church, as I did her grandmama, more than forty

years ago, at Kensington. Constance, *this* Constance is, as she well knows, to be my heiress. Travers, her grandfather, is now a silver-haired, yet hale, jocund, old man; and so tenderly, I repeat, has Time dealt with his wife,—the Constance Hervey of this narrative,—that I can sometimes hardly believe her to be more than about three or four and forty years of age. This is, however, perhaps only an illusion of the long and, whatever fools or sceptics may think or say, elevating dream that has pursued me through youth and middle age, even unto confirmed old bachelorthood. Madame L'Estrange, as before stated, died a short time since at Liverpool; her death, by influenza, the paper noticed, was sudden and unexpected.

A Skeleton in Every House.

No. 10.—THE MERCHANT OF ST. MALO.

THE great Catholic Feast of the Assumption on the 15th of August happening to fall on a Sunday, and the weather being superb, the usually dull and dirty town of St. Malo assumed an aspect of unusual joyance and brilliancy. The clear chiming of the cathedral and church bells, the animated strains of several military bands, the chanting of priests and acolytes at the head of numerous processions of young girls, dressed in white, garlanded with flowers, and bearing lighted tapers in their hands, passing slowly along, to make their first communion, through buzzing crowds of admiring spectators, a large number of whom shone in the glory of regimentals, either of the Line or National Guard—produced a singularly gay and imposing effect ; and one would have supposed that some sparkles of

pleasurable emotion must have been excited in the saddest minds within reach of the exultant *carillon* of the streets. Not so, however. The fierce disquietude of M. Paul Fontanes, the prosperous and rising, if not as yet decidedly eminent merchant of the Rue Dupetit-Thouars, was exasperated thereby, not soothed, as he nervously tore open and glanced through a heap of correspondence brought him that morning by the American mail. "Curse the distracting din!" he savagely exclaimed, as a more than usually joyous burst of military music mingled with and seemed to sharpen the serpent-accents of a letter he had just opened. "It is impossible to comprehend what one reads." An exaggeration, at the very least, M. Paul Fontanes! Say the undulations of the music do assist in zigzagging the lines before you, their purport is plain enough even to your throbbing eyeballs—plain and frightful—as ruin! bankruptcy—*fraudulent* bankruptcy, which, according to a definition of the Code Napoleon, consists in recklessly trading beyond your means; and the punishment which may be awarded for that offence—oh, it is easy to see you hear that also distinctly enough through all the din and bustle of the streets—is—the galleys!

The history of M. Paul Fontanes up to this period of his life—he was in his thirty-second year—may be very briefly sketched. He was the only much-indulged son of a cautious, painstaking father, to whose property and business he had a few years previously succeeded.

The property consisted chiefly of about 80,000 francs in cash and *rentes*, and the business was a profitable connection with the Mauritius, in consignments of colonial products for sale in France. Fontanes *fils* had not, unfortunately, been long his own master, when his sanguine temperament, and anxiety to become speedily rich, induced him not only to enlarge greatly his sphere of commercial action, but to change entirely its character, by shipping large quantities of French goods to the American markets, for speculative sale, at his own risk. He had been for some time tolerably successful; but fortune had of late proved adverse; and in the letters now before him he read the disastrous results of his last and boldest speculation in silks and brandies, upon which an immense loss had been sustained; and he knew himself to be irretrievably insolvent, to the extent of at least 100,000 francs. "In about six weeks," he murmured, after a feverish glance at his private bill-book, and tearing open another letter, "the mass of my acceptances for those goods, which the remittances will scarcely more than half cover, fall due, and I shall—— Ha! what is this?" The blood rushed swiftly back to M. Paul Fontanes's pallid features as he ran over, in a hurried, trembling sort of confidential whisper to himself, the lines which had suddenly caught his attention:—"With reference to your inquiries concerning M. Jerome Bougainville, of Louisiana, we have to inform you that that gentleman died suddenly on the 18th ult. at New Orleans of fever,

after having taken his passage for Europe per the *Columbia* packet-ship, bound for Hâvre-de-Grace. By the next mail we shall be able to forward an attested copy of the deceased's will, by which the bulk of his property—over twenty-seven thousand pounds realised, and temporarily lodged by deceased in the St. Louis bank, where it of course still remains—is bequeathed to his niece, Eugénie Bougainville, eldest daughter of the Sieur Edouard Bougainville, formerly captain in the 17th Carabiniers, for whom you are interested, burdened only by a pension of two hundred a year to the said Edouard Bougainville, with remainder to his daughters by a second marriage. We shall be glad to act for the aforesaid legatee ; and if furnished with properly attested powers, and official proof of identity, there will be no difficulty in the way of the immediate transmission of the money, through such channel as may be advised.—Your obedient servants,

“SMITH & GREEN. New Orleans.”

M. Fontanes read this letter over and over again, each time with increasing palpitation of tone, before he seemed to have thoroughly mastered its meaning. “Twenty-seven thousand pounds sterling !” he presently exclaimed ; “nearly seven hundred thousand francs ! Grand Dieu!—can it be possible ! And to Eugénie Bougainville, the daughter of a beggar or thereabout—indebted to me something about a thousand francs, which he can only pay by miserable drib-

lets of instalments, always in arrear! If the devil, now, would only help me to the possession of this——Well? ”

Henri Jomard, a frank, intelligent-looking young man, in holiday attire, after tapping gently at the door, had entered the room, probably mistaking the loud soliloquising tones of M. Fontanes for permission to do so. He was that gentleman’s principal clerk.

“ Pardon, monsieur,” said Henri Jomard in respectful deprecation of his employer’s loud and angry “ Well? ” “ Pardon, monsieur, but Mademoiselle Bougainville”—

“ How!—what! ”

“ Mademoiselle Bougainville,” repeated Jomard, “ having accompanied her youngest sister Marie from Plaisance to receive her first communion, is desirous to see you, though not precisely a day for the transaction of business, to make a payment on account of the debt due by Monsieur Bougainville. Shall I ask her to come in? ”

An assenting gesture was immediately followed by Mademoiselle Bougainville’s entrance. She presented herself with the graceful ease and *aplomb* which usually distinguish a well-educated Frenchwoman, and said she had brought monsieur a hundred francs, in part liquidation of her father’s debt. M. Fontanes took the small canvas *sac*, poured the silver upon the table, seemed to count it with his eye for a moment, and

scrawled an acknowledgment. The shaking of his hand, which could scarcely hold the pen, shewed that his recent agitation had increased rather than subsided.

“Monsieur has heard nothing, I fear,” said Eugénie Bougainville as she placed the paper in her reticule, “in answer to the inquiries he has so kindly made relative to my uncle Monsieur Jerome Bougainville?”

“Nothing, mademoiselle,” was the quick reply; “that is,” added M. Fontanes, as if recollecting himself, and glancing towards a number of unopened letters —“that is, nothing in either of the letters from America I have yet opened. Should, however, there be any intelligence concerning him in those I have not read, it shall be immediately forwarded to Monsieur Bougainville.”

“Mademoiselle Bougainville sighed, courtesied her acknowledgments, and left the office, escorted by Henri Jomard. They had hardly gained the street when the clerk was recalled.

“Tell Mademoiselle Bougainville,” said M. Fontanes, “that if I have anything of importance to communicate, I shall do myself the pleasure of riding over to Plaisance this afternoon for that purpose. I suppose there would be no doubt of finding Monsieur Bougainville at home?”

“Assuredly not, monsieur. It is his youngest daughter Marie’s *jour-de-fête*, and we shall of course have a dance; therefore”—

"We!" echoed M. Fontanes with quick interrogation.

"Yes—that is, Eugé—Mademoiselle Bougainville," stammered Henri Jomard. "Being an intimate friend of my sister, I naturally accompany her when she pays a visit to Plaisance; and thus"—

"I understand. You may go, and do not forget to deliver my message." M. Paul Fontanes rose and locked the door the instant it closed after his clerk, as if determined not to be again interrupted, and was soon profoundly meditating upon the probable and possible consequences of the day's American advices; the charming face and figure he had just seen helping, we may be sure, to colour and direct his train of thought.

The result of his reflections was to take an unusually early dinner, dress himself with great care, mount his horse, and ride off in the direction of Plaisance—a small farmstead seven miles distant from St. Malo, on the road to Avranches. When about half-way, he turned off to visit a M. Messeroy, an old and intimate acquaintance. He was fortunately not only at home, but without company; and host and visitor gradually warming into eloquence over M. Messeroy's excellent wine, upon the current topics of the day, the splendour of the weather, and of the morning's religious ceremonies, the improved tone of the markets, and of commercial affairs generally, M. Fontanes took occasion, after a time, to remark in an off-hand, careless sort

of way, that his late American speculations had been attended with a success so much beyond his expectations, and they were sufficiently sanguine, that he had half a mind to try and make a bargain for Plaisance, if it was still in the market. Plaisance *was* in the market, as M. Paul Fontanes well knew; and, after much disputing and haggling, M. Fontanes agreed to become its purchaser at the somewhat extravagant price of 45,000 francs, upon condition of possession within one month, and especially that it should be concealed from the world that he had entered into any negotiation for the farm till after its present tenant, M. Bougainville, had been ejected.

"Bougainville," said M. Fontanes, "is a good fellow enough, and, spite of his poverty and unluckiness, is much respected. I should not, therefore, like to have it said that I had sought to deprive him of a home."

"Rest satisfied on that point, my dear Fontanes," replied M. Messeroy. "Bougainville is so much behind with his rent, that I was determined he should turn out at St. Michel, or at any rate at Christmas. But why do you purchase a house? Ho! ho! Maitre Paul; you are going to be married, are you? I half guessed so from the first. Well, courage! It is a fate which overtakes the best and wisest of us; and here's the lady's health, whoever she may be."

"With all my heart! And do not forget that what is as serious as a wedding or funeral is, that, to-morrow by ten o'clock, I lodge five thousand francs in your

hands as a pledge of the completion of the bargain upon my part, if you do not fail on yours."

"I'll take care of that, you may depend. *Au revoir*, then, if you will go; at ten to-morrow."

M. Fontanes regained the high-road, and trotted leisurely along towards M. Bougainville's. As he neared Plaisance, the bridle-path, winding round at a considerable elevation from the level of the house, gave to view the green-sward in its front, upon which still fell the rays of the fast westering sun in large patches of golden light, or broken into tremulous light and shadow by the tall fruit-trees that partially enclosed it. The sisters Bougainville, and a number of young friends, were dancing thereon to the music of Henri Jomard's flute; and several aged guests, amongst whom the Sieur Bougainville was conspicuous by his thin white hairs, erect military bearing, and the glittering cross upon his breast, were looking on, and, the male portion of them, smoking, in apparently measureless content.

"Quite an Arcadian scene!" mentally sneered M. Paul Fontanes. "Who would believe, now, that an abode of such rustic simplicity contains almost as grim a skeleton as mine does? Well, we must contrive that they destroy each other, and then Monsieur Bougainville and I may sleep sounder than either of us has of late."

The dance was arrested as M. Fontanes approached and respectfully saluted M. Bougainville, with whom he almost immediately withdrew into the house. They

were absent about ten minutes only; and as, upon their reappearance, the countenance of the veteran wore its usual aspect of calm impassibility, dancing was resumed with increased spirit, and after a time was joined in by M. Fontanes, with Eugénie Bougainville for a partner. Respectful, subdued, yet ardent admiration—admiration surprised at itself, as it were, has seldom been more adroitly displayed than by that gentleman upon this occasion; and whether the consciousness thereof, betrayed by Eugénie's tell-tale blushes, was pleasurable or otherwise, it would have been difficult for a spectator to determine. Poor Henri Jomard—whose flute, momently becoming weaker and more uncertain, was at last superseded by a volunteer violin—sat apart from the gay dancers, partially concealed from observation by his anxious and sympathising sister. Eugénie, however, must have noticed his agitation, for never had her voice and manner revealed so much of womanly tenderness as on parting with him at the close of that sad and ominous evening.

“Eugénie,” said M. Bougainville after all in the house but themselves had retired to rest, “I have ill news for thee. Thy uncle Jérôme, whose address Monsieur Fontanes’s agent had no difficulty, after all, in ascertaining, gruffly told the messenger who delivered the letter that it would receive no answer.”

“Hélas!” sighed Eugénie, “I feared so; and he was our last resource!”

"Our position is embarrassing," said the father, with an unsuccessful effort to assume a more cheerful tone. "The harvest has been a bad one; but things will not always turn out like that. Thy uncle has disappointed me, Eugénie," he added, after an interval of melancholy silence; "but what, after all, could be expected of a man who left France to avoid the conscription?"

"Nay, father, let us be just. Have I not heard you say that Uncle Jerome was betrayed in his affections by a faithless woman?"

"Tut, my girl!" rejoined M. Bougainville, with a levity of tone contradicted by the keen scrutiny of his look, which was, however, baffled by the growing darkness of the room. "Love-wounds are rose-brier scratches merely—a momentary smart, that neither hinders nor controls one's march through the rough wilderness of life. I have been pretty familiar with the flashes which herald real wounds and death, and they did not leap from maidens' eyes."

"I am glad to hear," softly murmured Eugénie, "that heart-griefs are so fugitive with men. Good-night, dear father."

"Good-night, Eugénie," said the veteran, embracing her with tenderness; "and be not too much cast down. The guardian-angel is never forgetful of a gentle and pious child like thee."

Before noon on the following day, the stock, farming implements, and furniture at Plaisance were se-

questrated by “justice” at the instance of Pierre Messeroy, *Ecuyer*, for arrears of rent; and M. Bougainville was at the same time served with notice to quit, according to one of the covenants of his *bail*, by which right to retain possession was forfeited by default of rent-payment. “Diable! but this is serious — terrible,” murmured the old soldier; “and unless I can obtain a loan of ”—— M. Bougainville checked himself, and after a time added, addressing his dismayed and weeping family: “I shall set off at once for St. Malo. Courage, my children! It is upon the darkest hour of night that the new day breaks. Perhaps my old friend, Bertin the notary, may be able to assist us in this strait.”

M. Bougainville did not return home till about ten o’clock in the evening. The family were in bed, with the exception of Eugénie, whose anxiety was deepened by the pale excitement of her father’s countenance.

“Eugénie, my girl,” he said, after a few unsuccessful whiffs at the pipe she presented him with, “come nearer to me; I will speak with thee.”

“I am listening, father,” said Eugénie, seating herself behind her father.

“Bertin cannot assist us, but—— Eugénie, it is necessary, above all, that we should be frank and open with each other. Henri Jomard loves thee; there can be no doubt of that. He is a well-principled brave lad, of fair prospects too, and the son of a brave father, who fell by my side at Eylau. There is no one with whom I would more readily trust thy happiness. But

thou hast never, I think, shown any open, decided preference for him ? ”

“ Never—by *words*.”

M. Bougainville winced, but went on to say : “ That being so, I may tell thee that Monsieur Paul Fontanes — Ah ! the name shocks thee—I will speak of him and his offers no more.”

“ Yes, yes, dear father,” murmured Eugénie. “ It was a sudden, a slight pain ; that is all. Go on—speak ! ”

“ As thou wilt. Monsieur Fontanes, then, solicits thee in marriage. If his proposal is accepted, he will pay all thy father’s debts, purchase Plaisance of that tiger-hearted Messeroy, and settle it upon thee beyond his own control.” Eugénie did not answer, and M. Bougainville added, after a few moments’ silence : “ The case stands thus. Eugénie, Monsieur Fontanes is rich, generous, young, well-looking, of irreproachable character, and it is plain loves thee deeply. I doubt not, therefore, that after a time thou wouldest be a happy wife ; but it is for thee to decide ; and my blessing, beloved Eugénie, is on thy choice, whether for acceptance or refusal.”

“ For acceptance, then ! ” replied Eugénie in a low voice, the firmness of which surprised as much as it pleased M. Bougainville ; “ but with this change in the terms of the pur—of the contract—that Plaisance be settled, not upon me, but upon you, Francoise, and Marie.”

M. Bougainville was charmed with this ready ac-

quiescence ; and when Eugénie made no objection to M. Fontanes's request, that the marriage should be celebrated without delay, he almost persuaded himself that he had been mistaken with respect to the sentiments she entertained towards Henri Jomard. That pleasing illusion would have been dispelled had he known that Eugénie passed that night on her knees, weeping at first with convulsive, but gradually calming grief, before the crucifix in her bedroom.

The civil marriage was arranged to take place on the following Thursday, the conditions of settlement to be signed at the office of the notary, Bertin, on the previous evening. These arrangements, at M. Fontanes's urgent request, Eugénie remaining entirely passive, were kept scrupulously secret ; and so successfully, that even Henri Jomard had no suspicion of what was going on till the Wednesday morning, when he chanced to overhear some disjointed sentences of a conversation between M. Fontanes and the notary's clerk, who had called at the Rue Dupetit-Thouars, which terminated by M. Fontanes saying in a low voice, "Tell Monsieur Bertin I will send him the required particulars in writing before two o'clock." Astonished and indignant at what he apprehended the partially overheard colloquy to mean, he, as soon as possible, invented an excuse for going out, and hastened to impart the dire discovery to his sister Adèle, who, however, proved obstinately incredulous. His interpretation of the sentences he had imperfectly

caught was, she persisted, that of an unreasoning jealousy. M. Fontanes had, her brother knew, a pecuniary transaction with M. Bougainville, and it was no doubt with reference to that the two were to meet at the notary's, as the conversation seemed to intimate. Somewhat calmed by this consolatory construction of the menacing words, Henri returned to his employment. There was no one in the clerks' office, and M. Fontanes was busy writing in his private room. Something presently occurred which rendered it necessary that Henri should speak with him ; and as he did so his eye fell upon a small pile of letters enclosed and directed, but not sealed, of which the topmost one was addressed to "M. Bertin, Notaire-public. Numéro 9, Rue Sablonière." Instantly the criminal thought, which only his excessive mental agitation could in the least excuse, suggested itself, that if he could obtain a moment's possession of that letter before it was sealed, the doubts which half distracted him would be one way or the other set at rest ; and the possibility of effecting his object kept him for the next ten minutes in a state of feverish restlessness. The chance at length presented itself. The presence of M. Fontanes was required in a distant part of the warehouse ; and his back was hardly turned, before Henri Jomard darted into the private *cabinet*, seized the top letter of the pile, and extricated the enclosure from the envelope. Confusion ! A glance at the address showed him he had mistaken the letter, the envelope

in his hand being addressed to Messrs. Smith and Green, New Orleans. Had he but unfolded the enclosure, what a discovery awaited him! Unfortunately, he threw it impatiently upon the table, and seized the next upon the pile, which was that he sought. Could he believe his eyes? “M. Fontanes, upon reflection, acquiesced in the change proposed by M. Bertin in the marriage-contract, and would be at the notary’s office punctually at five o’clock to meet M. and Mademoiselle Bougainville.” Henri Jomard had hardly perused these lines, when the step of M. Fontanes was heard approaching. He hurriedly thrust the letters into their respective envelopes, replaced them on the letter-pile, and had barely regained the curtained concealment of the clerks’ office, when the merchant returned. In about ten minutes, M. Fontanes summoned a porter, gave him a number of letters, some for the post-office, others for delivery in St. Malo; and shortly afterwards himself went out, saying, as he passed through the counting-house, that he should not return till the following morning.

Eugénie Bougainville, as she alighted at the notary’s door in company with her father and Françoise her half-sister, looked charmingly, though very pale, and trembling with agitation. M. Fontanes had preceded her; and his respectfully kind and unpretending manner seemed, after a time, to soothe and calm her spirits, and the sweet, grateful, if faint smile with which she acknowledged his unobtrusive courte-

sies, was an earnest that if the marriage should turn out unhappily it would not be the fault of the wife, however reluctantly she accepted M. Fontanes as a husband. M. Bertin was apparently about to commence reading the marriage-contract, when an unseemly and distressing interruption took place. Henri Jomard, spite of the strenuous opposition of a clerk, forced his way, in a state of wild excitement, into the office, and forthwith burst into a torrent of invective and entreaty, of bitter reproach and humblest solicitation, to which passion and despair lent fire and eloquence. Uselessly so ! Eugénie was indeed terribly agitated by his frenzied violence, but did not for a moment swerve in resolution ; and she was the first, though with white, quivering lips, to request that the business which had brought them there might be proceeded with. M. Fontanes, who appeared both alarmed and angry, wished the audacious intruder to be expelled by force, but at a gesture from the notary, who had been silently observant of what was passing, he desisted, drew near the table, and seated himself beside Mademoiselle Bougainville ; whilst Henri Jomard, throwing himself into a chair, wept aloud in the bitterness of unavailing grief and rage.

“ Now, Monsieur Bertin,” said M. Fontanes, who, spite of himself, cowered beneath the keen derisive look, it so seemed, with which the notary, as he slowly unrolled the contract, regarded him, “ have the goodness to proceed as quickly as possible.”

"I doubt, Monsieur Fontanes, whether I shall proceed at all. It seems to me that the nuptial-conditions, in a pecuniary sense, are grossly one-sided and partial"—

"Monsieur Bertin," interrupted M. Fontanes with dignity, and greatly relieved, "that is my affair, not yours. The balance of obligation is, in my own opinion, greatly on my side," added the young merchant with a respectful bow to Eugénie.

"That is precisely my opinion also," rejoined the imperturbable notary, "Mademoiselle Bougainville being at the present moment a rich heiress in her own right."

A bomb-shell falling in the midst could not have produced a more startling effect than these words, which caused every one of the auditors, Henri Jomard included, to start to their feet in various attitudes of astonishment and consternation.

"This information," continued the notary, "reached me only about two hours since, and, strangely enough, Monsieur Fontanes, from you. A letter, certainly in your handwriting, and addressed to me on the cover, but the contents of which were intended for Messrs. Smith and Green, of New Orleans"—

"Malediction!" screamed M. Fontanes. "Can it be possible—that I—that I"—

"That you misdirected the letters," suggested M. Bertin; "no doubt of it. It appears, Mademoiselle Bougainville," he added, "that by your uncle's will,

the contents of which the last American mail made known to your very disinterested suitor, you are the absolute mistress of about seven hundred thousand francs ! If, under these circumstances, you wish me to proceed "—

"Henri—dear Henri!" gasped Eugénie, turning with outstretched arms towards her lately despairing lover. "Henri—believe"— But I have no words for the description of the scene which followed ; the reader's imagination can alone realise its tumult of rapture, bewilderment, and despair.

Henri Jomard must, in his hurry and confusion, have changed the envelopes of the two letters : that addressed to Smith and Green being consequently delivered to the notary. I have only, in conclusion, to state, that Fontanes was arrested at Hâvre-de-Grace on board of an American liner, and is now undergoing the punishment of a fraudulent bankrupt ; that Eugénie is Madame Jomard, and a happy wife and mother ; that the Sieur Bougainville still inhabits Plaisance with his two daughters, and to this day remains firmly of opinion, that the misdirection of the letter was due to the actual interposition of Eugénie's ever-watchful *ange gardien* !

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